

Game of the Gods

by Jeff20

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Summary: Freya likes her heroes dead. Loki torments the living. Thor rewards courage. Why does Astrid become protective of Hiccup? How does she become "future daughter-in-law" of Stoick? What does our favorite blonde-haired shield-maiden learn that will involve her village, the entire known world... and more important... her chosen man? Starts near end of 1st movie. Spoilers of 2.

1. Introduction and Notes

****Introduction, Rules, and Notes.****

This is based at the end of the first movie, and the elapsed time between then and the second movie. It may contain reference to things that happened in the first TV series. It may contain book references commonly used. It may contain some Norse mythology. It will also have some things I just made up as I go along.

This is my first Dragon Fanfic. I like to explain a few thoughts before we dive into the story. I try not to spoil much, and if you want, you can just skip this. I tend to put down a few things bouncing around in my brain.

I start with ideas and notes months before I write the final version. Sometimes, things don't mesh as well as I like. I remove, add, or change things, and then have to change some more. Even after I publish some chapters, something needs work later. Hence the occasional delays.

Also, I am doing like most. I am picking bits and pieces of Norse mythology here. The stories are beautiful, but complicated. I'm picking a few things here and there, and filling in a few different things. Please don't use it as an excuse to 'educate me' on my technical errors.

(UPDATE PART)

I started expanding my ideas on this before the sequel came out, and found some of it quite outdated. I had to go through a hundred or so pages and change a bit. I apologize for anything that may have gotten lost. It's like when you read the earliest stories, and you see a hundred different names for Astrid's dragon. The real name hadn't been spoken yet.

In my original intro I stated I don't really use OCs. Well, as this started to flesh out, I realized I needed more real people. The Gods, of course, are historical, so Loki, Odin, Freya, and the rest of the Asgard crowd are okay. But with a lot of guys and only two female characters, things didn't work out. So I introduced Berta and Thessa. I'm not saying there may not be more.

I am thankful for the encouraging notes from people. That's why I do it, really. To entertain you.

I look at some of my own writing and think; "Whoa!". I must have been reading too many detective novels, or even romantic novels. If I stray too far into 'M rated' territory, please remind me. Wouldn't want to get banned. This has considerably more 'adult situation' talk than my other current work. And some of this is quite toned down from the original notes.

(End Update)

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I try to stay within the canon of the world of HtTYD. I do not do alternate worlds, time travel, or major characters that never existed. That said, in the movie, other than an occasional line, there were only eight main characters. For my tale, there will be more people involved than that. I will not claim them as original characters of my own devise. Just think of them as expanded supporting roles. They were there in the movie, just not speaking. After all, you can't flesh out a plot without other people.

My story begins on the day of the battle of Dragon Island, and the death of the Queen. (That's my term. I believe most refer to her as the Red Death) With a few short time skips, it continues over the first few years.

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I'm going to take this time to throw in a few historical notes. Viking culture has fascinated me since the third grade. It may have something to do why I love this movie so much. The dragon's head ships, colorful shields lined down the sidesâ€| the raids, with pillaging, and looting, and all kinds of fun stuffâ€| Well, that fascinated me more than cowboys and race cars.

Now I am not trying to tear down the movie by any means. Most of the facts would be a bit complex for young ones, anyway. I'm just going to explain what I noticed about some things. For the sake of continuity, I won't change the story to match history. But readâ€| maybe you'll pick up a few fun facts!

Naming: The names were wrong, but to follow history would have

required a long explanation. The names in some of the Nordic countries were eventually anglicized over the centuries. The Norse people did not have surnames. A person was identified by their family line. As towns grew larger, and peoples mingled more, and the Viking ways died away, eventually surnames were adopted. What do I mean?

Here's an example. A common Norse name was your given name, and your 'last name' identified your family. Therefore 'Bill Anderson', to a Viking, would mean; 'Bill, son of Ander'. That is why so many Anglo-Saxon names end in '-son' today. Not a universal rule, but common.

But the female part has been totally left out over the centuries, for the simple reason of paperwork. Take Astrid, for instance. She is named as Astrid Hofferson. But isn't she a girl? Her name would really be Astrid Hofferdottr (provided her Father's name really was Hoffer). Guess where we got the word _daughter_ from? I believe Iceland is the only land that may do this today. And yes, Tuffnut and Ruffnut would have different last names.

Culture: Don't flame me, but they didn't call themselves Vikings all the time. What we refer to as Vikings covers a general area of geography during a period of time. They included the Danes, Norsemen, and some others. 'Norse' is a general name for the Northern Tribes. Love those word roots! Among themselves, they often held an uneasy peace, with trade and cooperation. But to othersâ€|

They truly were a tough people. Settled in some of the coldest parts of Europe, they had to live in a harsh environment. What became a rite of passage for young men was 'going Viking'. Like when you hear an Australian say 'going walkabout', except with more swordplay and looting. When they could get enough men and a ship or so, they would sail off. This was their test of manhood. The young Norsemen 'going Viking' gained status and glory from proving themselves in battle, and bringing home oodles of loot, including possibly young maidens. If there was no war, or argument with another tribe, they had to make up their own. This was especially bad in the very early days of England, when there was no central army, navy, or general defense whatsoever. The Norse practically occupied part of England for some time. So the generic term Viking was what the rest of the world called them.

One thing I want to explain, since it's in the story, is the difference between 'dowry' and 'bride-price'. Both are where the families involved negotiate the terms of marriage for the daughter of a family when they got 'husband-high'.

Dowry would be the gift that the daughter would bring to the family of the man. It could be land, money, livestockâ€| you get it. The higher the dowry, the better suitors you could attract. Sometimes, though, a very large dowry was required to get rid of an otherwise unmarriageable girl. The idea of a dowry is the one that survived more into modern times.

Bride-price was the opposite. This would be more in line with the Norse. A particularly attractive or strong girl, knowledgeable in the art of running an extended family household, or perhaps warcraft, would get the attention of men. With the men going Viking, they had to trust that their holdings would stay intact while they were gone.

The shrewd father of such a desirable girl could profit greatly, turning it almost into an auction, basically.

There are notes on the bride-price being in parts, with the family of the proposed groom taking the legal, and physical ownership of the girl from the bride's family (and 'physical' did mean paying for 'you-know-what'). And included would be a dowry of sortsâ€¦ a 'kick-back' to the groom's family. Sometimes it worked more like an alliance than a marriage.

The sad part of it all is that in either case, the poor girl often has little say in this. Sadder still, the systems still exist in some parts of the world.

Technology: Norse technology was basically stuck in the Iron Age. There was no real 'Viking uniform'. Whether through trading, war, or looting, it is known that they wore a mixture of Roman, Greek, or any other style helmets, armor, or clothing. Technically, Astrid's leather strip skirt is a Roman design. Bronze was especially prized loot, since mining was rough in the North. And as a blow to my childhood, they did not wear horns in their helmets like that. That apparently came from finding Viking graves, and thinking that the drinking horns they were buried with came from the helmets. I hope there was a few that did, though.

Religion: I won't go into the parallels of that, since there is a world of discussion about similarities and differences to Greek, Roman, and Norse religion. Since the Greeks seemed to get everything organized first, it is generally accepted that Roman and Nordic gods evolved along similar lines due to the spread of legends and myth.

In some ways, Norse ideas took root more than others to this dayâ€¦ some days of our week are named for the Norse godsâ€¦ the Christmas tree, the Yule logâ€¦ Anglo-Saxon rituals kept a few of the Norse traditions.

These are just a few generic things, and feel free to look up more in-depth tales. By the way, there are a few good movies to see some Vikings in, and two that have a nice mix of fantasy and/or science fiction (which Fanfic writers love). Also, from a tech standpoint, they try to be historically accurate. Just ignore the fact that there wasn't so much tempered steel lying about in those days. Movies never get that part very accurate anyway, because polished steel is soooo shiny.

"The 13th Warrior". I love this film, and the lead actor. About an Arab who fights with the Norsemen against an ancient evil.

"Outlander". Science fiction film? Monster film? Both! The sole survivor of a spacecraft lands near a Viking village. He has to help them fight the creature that destroyed his ship.

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*Legal: I need to remind you that How to Train Your Dragon, and all characters included therein, are fully owned by DreamWorks. This would include any accurate depiction of anything from the film or TV

series. Seriously, it was genius. I'm not really that smart.

**** More Legal:** Anything that describes any characters or places from the book series is owned by Cressida Cowell. Unfortunately, she hangs out in all the foreign countries and not very likely to stop by my local coffee shop.

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Thank you.

2. Reflections

****Reflections.****

Hiccup had timed it perfectly. Waiting for the Queen to build up for one of her horrible blasts, he turned Toothless, who fired at the one precise moment. This was the gamble for man and dragon. And it had worked. The Queen, burning from within, crashed to the ground, her body twisting as the flames consumed her.

Her tail swung around randomly. Toothless, his half-tail burned away, simply was not agile enough to dodge this time. He screeched as his human fell away towards the growing explosion of fire, dirt, and burning dragon. He dove into the storm of Hel after his rider.

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We did it! _He did it!_ Astrid was pushing her way through the mass of Vikings all moving towards Stoick, who had run into the smoke shouting for his son. Glancing around, the other teens were gathering themselves, they and their dragons all on the ground. Fishlegs was wobbly, leaning against his Gronckle. Snotlout was sitting on the ground, dazed, and nearby, the twins were dancing and banging their heads together.

She looked up, scanning the sky, looking for the black shape of the one she needed to see mostâ€¦ a Night Fury. As the smoke cleared in the stiff breeze, there was nothing in the sky at all. She did not think that only a few days ago, the sight would have filled her with anger and fear. Now, it would make her happier than anything.

She pushed through the front of the crowd. She sawâ€¦ _NO!_ Stoick was kneeling in front of the weary Night Fury collapsed in a curled heap. She looked to Toothless's back. All she saw was a burned, torn saddle, with the controls twisted and broken. It looked like Stoick was talking to the dragon.

He can't be gone. Her throat was blocked somehow. She couldn't get enough air. She felt dizzy, and confused. _He's too stubborn to die_. Things looked blurry. It must be the smoke. A shield-maiden did not cry.

Then Toothless unfolded his wings, and Stoick began yelling again.

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"_Damn_!" A fist slammed down on the edge of the scrying pool. "You can't do this! I will _NOT_ be cheated again!"

The outburst came from what most would call the most beautiful woman that ever existed. You noticed first a delicate face, framed with thick hair. Blond to the point of almost white, it hung flowing, unbraided, to her waist. She wore a simple white tunic. She also wore a breastplate. It was shimmering gold, and every bit of it was covered in tiny, beautiful engravings. It looked far too light and flimsy to be real armor, but no weapon wrought by man could so much as make the smallest scratch on it.

Her eyes were a silver grey. They shone like polished metal in the sun. They were, at this time, locked upon the man standing on the other side of the round scrying pool.

'Man' would be only a basic physical description, though. Tall, broad in build, showing scars from a thousand battles, and a beard grey beyond grey from the ages he has seen. This day he was dressed in a simple grey tunic, and unshod. He finally looked towards the woman, a faint smile on his face. His face was lined, not only from age, but from having seen, good and evil, all that man had proven capable of.

"Calm yourself, Freya. I did not cheat." His gaze held the woman in place. "Loki swayed your thoughts. He is the one who promised you warriors, not I." He walked around the pool, stopping to look out the openings surrounding the stone building they were in. He never tired of looking at the calm sky, the fields and forests, and the distant mountains. This is where he came to feel _peace_, a precious commodity lately. And it would soon get worse.

He continued, still looking outward. "I told you that it would be a senseless slaughter or an astounding victory, only that. It hung on the edge of a blade." The man smiled, something he did so seldom recently. "Who knew that the most unlikely warrior would tip the balance?" He felt a touch of pride, that the mortals could still produce such wondrous souls. He also knew why this boy was different, but that would only make Freya angrier.

Freya was not put off so easily. "I have sent the Valkyries! They _cannot_ come back empty-handed!" She walked around to stand in front of him, with the grin of a fox that has seen a lone chicken. "You said it yourselfâ€¦| _warrior_. I _demand_ at least the _boy_! It is his time!" She smiled. "The songs! The stories! Such has not been told for some time in my halls. He will be honored by heroes. Why do you stop me?"

The man shook his head. "It is not known yet. Do not get ahead of yourself in this." He nodded. "Yes, I know you use very loose judgment sometimes on how you take your share."

He pointed to the pool, showing now the gathering around a small, still form. "As long as he still draws breath, you may not touch him. I feel his story is not finished."

And with that, Odin, the All-Father, left the temple.

Freya looked into the scrying pool. She tapped a cheek with a fingertip. Then her lips curled in a smile.

As long as he still draws breath.

But who will help me?

Oh, not him!

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Astrid stumbled towards Stoick, who was holding the small limp body and yelling for a healer. A woman brushed by her and knelt beside Stoick. She seemed to take charge. "Furs! Build a fire! Draw clean water!" She felt Hiccup's neck, pressing her fingers to the place that she could tell if his heart was still beating and how strong. This did not make her smile. Several men had pulled off fur coats and vests, laying them on a flat spot of ground for a make-shift bed. She pulled Stoick by the arm, and helped him gently lay Hiccup down. Toothless moaned, and tried to get up, to be closer to his human, but failed. His eye locked on the still form.

She examined his leg. It ended at the ankle. But worse, above it was ripped, burnt flesh, hanging in pieces. She looked around at the men. "A belt! Or strap! Hurry!" Taking one from the several pushed at her, she wrapped it around Hiccup's leg, just above the knee. She wrapped it, tied it, and began pulling on the ends. "Help me!"

Astrid was the fastest. Kneeling across from her, she grabbed one end. The healer told her "We must pull it tight very tight. His leg is gone, but he cannot lose any more blood." Astrid gagged at the smell of burnt flesh, but pulled with all her strength, until the healer tied the ends of the strap. "That will hold for now."

Then she looked Astrid in the eyes. "Astrid I cannot
everything we brought, it was on the boats. My herbs, medicines
tools
everything!" Her eyes were pleading. Her eyes were the light grey of an early winter fog. Astrid knew those eyes. It was Berta.

The last time she had looked into those eyes, a year ago, she had been angry, and yelling. She had accused Berta of being a coward, of being useless. To give up being a shield-maiden! Now those words pierced her own heart like a dagger.

Astrid drew her lips into a hard line. "Then you shall have more." She stood and turned to Stoick, behind them. "I can get to Berk and back in a few hours."

Stoick looked into the dirty, tear-streaked face, and nodded. "Aye. Tell them to start sending the fishing boats. And food, and tents. Winter is coming, and it will take many trips to get us all home again." Every longboat in Berk was now at the bottom of the sea. Men were diving into the wreckage, trying to recover anything useful, but the water and salt had ruined most.

Astrid spun on her heel, and sprinted to her Nadder. _I can't take the time to lead the boats back here_; she thought. She went over to Snotlout, who was standing bragging with the twins.

"Snotlout! Tuffnut! Ruffnut!" She stopped in front of them, hands on her hips. "We have to get back to Berk. Somebody needs to lead the

boats back here with supplies." She looked at the faces, still smiling. "Move, you fools! If you haven't noticed, there's no food, no shelter, and no boats!" She took a breath. "And Hiccup is hurt. I haven't got time to lead boats. I'm going for healer supplies." She ran off, yelling; "Just get there fast!"

She slid to a stop in front of her Nadder. "We were so cruel for so long, girl. But I need your help more than anything now." She placed her hand on the Nadder's nose. It looked closely at her. "Hiccup is hurt. We need help. We must get to Berk _fast_."

Astrid did not know at the time, but Hiccup had such a strong bond with Toothless because dragons are _empathic_ creatures. They can read the emotions of each other, and also of humans. For centuries, dragons had reacted to the fear, anger, and rage of the humans with the same.

But when Hiccup freed the Night Fury instead of killing him, the dragon did not feel these. Fear, yes, but _different_. The dragon felt compassion, and curiosity, and a mind different from the others. That is why Hiccup survived that day.

Now, another dragon looked into a human's eyes. This one felt pain, and hurt, even though the young female had no wound. This was the pain when a nestmate was in trouble.

The Nadder turned towards the sea, and the human village. She dropped a wing towards the female. She looked over her shoulder at Astrid.

Astrid gave a grim smile, leaping onto the shoulder of the Nadder. "_Now_, girl! Show them what fast means!" She held tight, snapping backwards at the explosive takeoff, the Nadder's unusually strong hind legs launching them into the air almost at full speed.

Stoick watched her leave, as the others began mounting their dragons to follow. Then he looked back to his son.

"Gods be with you, girl. Gods be with you."

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Freya looked around the edge of the doorway, Here, they were long past embarrassment with each other, but still, there were some things she did not care to see.

He was sitting in a huge chair at the back of the chamber. Tall, with dark hair, and golden-brown eyes. By mortal standards, he was quite handsome, and he had used that to his advantage on many visits to Midgard. He was more slightly built than the usual warrior, but he had proven far more dangerous than any. He was currently juggling, of all things. A number of blue-white fiery globes moved in an intricate pattern in his hands.

"Freya! How nice of you to call!" He smiled without looking at her. He turned and stood, moving in quick, lithe movements. His size belied his strength and speed. He would be _here_, and suddenly he would be _there_. Freya noticed, as he approached her, that the globes never stopped moving in their place at the chair.

She walked towards him. The chamber was as usual. There were fur-covered couches around the walls. There were tables, and shelves, all covered with the most unusual artifacts. They ranged from the ordinary in appearance, such as goblets, or daggers, to things that one could not look at directly, lest one lose their mind. Everything had the look of rich and exotic goods, but roughly used. But nothing in this room was ordinary.

"Greetings, Loki." Freya looked about at the furnishings. "I am surprised not to find a shield-maiden or so swooning about."

He laughed, and ran a hand through his thick, dark hair. "I have been busy lately. Besides, my healer has told me to slow down." He walked around her completely, coming to a stop in front of her. "But this is a pleasant surprise."

Freya shook her head. "After all this time, Loki, I doubt that anyone could possibly surprise you. I think the very stones of Asgard report to you."

In reply, Loki held out his hand. A round sphere appeared. Whether it became a solid crystal, or remained air, none could tell. Displayed within was the image of a tiny black dragon, with a person riding it, as it flew through the air. Loki closed his hand into a fist, and the globe disappeared.

"Why do you want this boy so badly?" He asked. "Surely you cannot be so hurting for male companionship." Then he gave her a smirk. "But that would break your rules, wouldn't it?" He walked behind her, leaning over and whispering in her ear; "I know of what you and your precious Valkyrie do behind closed doors."

He walked back to her front, clapping his hands together and rubbing them back and forth. "But that is old news, and you can give us the details another time." He flopped onto a couch, propping his head on his hand. "Now tell me."

Freya sighed. "If you haven't noticed, there have been fewer and fewer warriors lately." She waved a hand at nothing. "Yes, there are many battles, and thousands dead, but none for the Hall of Heroes." She raised her arms at the ceiling and looked up. "There was a time when men challenged even the Gods! They slew ancient monsters, and laid waste to whole armies!" She lowered her arms and crossed them over her stomach. "But those days, they are gone. They fight senseless wars, killing thousands for a piece of land. Or even for no real reason at all. Any fool who can ride a horse across a field without falling off is declared a hero."

She had started pacing without realizing. "Only the Norsemen truly hold to the old ways. This one village, one incredible place holds all the stubbornness and courage left in the North. For centuries, many heroes have come to me from this one small place." She pointed accusingly at Loki; "And you promised a glorious battle! And I have _nothing_!"

Loki sat up straight, still grinning. "But that is your own problem, dear Freya. You think glory only means death." He stood up. "But life can be glorious, too, you know. You think that a man has only one task, and when that task is finished, he should die." He raised his

hand, and the globe appeared again. The black dragon, frozen in flight, with the boy clinging to the dragon's back, smiling. He dropped the globe, and it fell to the floor, shattering, the pieces of heavy crystal bouncing around.

"You think death is a reward, Freya, and you are wrong. Life is the reward."

"Life!" She sneered. "Scrabbling in the dirt like animals! Sickness! Hunger! Age! That is no reward!"

Loki held up his hand. "Calm, dear Freya. As it is, I can sympathize with you this once. It is, perhaps, time to start a new game now that the mountain serpent is gone. The fights were so entertaining."

He held up his hand again. In his palm, a small red bag, tied with a golden string, appeared. "I will see this boy. Make sure no one is watching when the moon is at its peak." He closed his hand, and the small bag disappeared.

Freya looked in his face closely. "After all the centuries, it is still difficult to tell which of your powers are real, and which are illusion."

Loki smiled. "Ah, and that is why my enemies always fail. Because, you see, even illusion is a real power."

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Astrid landed near the Great Hall. She jumped from the Nadder's back, and turned to the people coming towards her. Reflexively, she patted the heaving side of the dragon to calm her. "Easy, girl. No one will ever hurt you again here."

These people were not afraid. The women, children, and the old had watched as Hiccup had brought out the dragons. They watched in amazement as he had taken the teens to them, one at a time, and made introductions. Before they had left, even the youngest present there had been sniffed, and had patted the smooth, scaly nose of a dragon. Hiccup had awakened something that had been long missing from Berk, something that only he had still possessed wonder.

Now, instead of screaming and brandishing weapons, women and children were running up the hill, anxious for news of their loved ones. What a huge difference a single day and a single boy could make. Astrid only had a moment to think of that as she ran towards the villagers.

She raised her arms to keep people at arm's length. "Wait!" She waved her hands to quiet the barrage of questions. "Please! Where is a healer? I need help!"

A middle-aged man came to the front. "I train under Gothi."

Astrid looked up into his face. "Nobody is dead yet. But Hiccup is wounded. All the medicines were burned or sunk. I have to take what Berta needs. Please hurry!" Breathing hard, she gasped out the last of her request.

The man turned and ran towards the Healer house as if wolves were chasing him. Astrid turned to face the villagers. "Everyone! Nobody has died! But the boats are sunk! We have to take the fishing boats to Dragon Island to get our people back! And they need foodâ€¦ tentsâ€¦ blanketsâ€¦" She coughed, gasping, the wind of the trip and the yelling, on top of everything else, was taking its toll. She continued. "I have to get medicine back there! Others are coming behind me to guide you there!" Several of the older men ran towards the dock. A dozen women ran to the stores, or their houses. The relief that it had not been a massacre of Vikings was evident in the smiles the women could not hold back.

The man came running back much faster than expected. He handed Astrid a satchel, rather heavy, hanging from a strap. "Here." He panted. "This has everything you should need."

Astrid took the bag, but had a worried look. "How could you have prepared everything that fast? What if Iâ€¦"

The man waved his hand. "It was an idea of Hiccup's. For when we were attacked. It was prepared with some of everything we needâ€¦ and ready in an instant. Berta will know this. She is most skilled."

She is most skilled. Another dagger in Astrid's heart. She took the bag and threw the strap over her neck, pulling the satchel around to her back. "Pray for them." She said as she turned and ran back to her dragon.

As she climbed up the Nadder's neck, slower this time, she asked for the strength she needed for one more flight. She rubbed the dragon's neck. "I am sorry, girl. Pleaseâ€¦ we have to get back quickly. Take me to Hiccup. Then we can rest." The Nadder launched into the air, channeling the urgency she felt from her rider.

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Stoick knelt beside his son, watching as Berta cleaned and checked Hiccup. "Will he live, lass?" he croaked.

Berta frowned. "Stoickâ€¦ I'll not lie to you now. It may depend on how soon Astrid gets back." She looked into the chief's eyes just for a second. "Most dragon blood is poison. If it gets into an open wound it canâ€¦ be very bad. The boy had so much on him." She went back to work. "Gothi has worked many years on finding medicines to stop it. But every dragon is different. And this oneâ€¦"

Stoick nodded, looking at the sky. "Aye. This demonâ€¦" Again, he felt the pain of his pride. Hiccup had tried to warn him, and his reward was to be disowned. And still, he had fought for his people, even in the moment Stoick had realized their doom when the Queen burst from the mountain. He now had a different kind of prideâ€¦ a pride for his son.

He heard a strange sound, and looked around. The dragon that Hiccup had called Toothless was dragging itself along the ground, trying to get closer to his human. Stoick moved aside as the Night Fury settled on its stomach a few feet away from Hiccup. It gave a small wuff. The eyes never left the boy.

Gratitude towards a _dragon_ was a new thing. Stoick had called his own son a traitor to his people. And then a dragonâ€ the most feared one they had knownâ€ had fought the monster with his son.

He knelt down beside the dragon. "You wait with us." _How do I talk toâ€ it? Him? What does it understand? It loves my son. It understands him. More than I did._ "I will do what I must to make it up to him, devâ€ umâ€ dragon." He did not ever imagine using _thank you_ and _dragon_ in the same thought. His world had shifted.

He stood up. "Tell me if anything changes.", he told Berta. "I have to see to the people." He walked towards a fire, where Gobber was talking to several men and women, sending them on tasks.

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Despite everything, Astrid was fading. This day had taken a heavy toll, and her last reserve of energy was giving out. She had wrapped the ropes around her hands to keep from falling off. The Nadder was going at a fair speedâ€ not the fastest, but sustainable. Dragon and girl were both tired. Astrid worried for the brave Nadder, as she noticed that the ocean was closer than before. _Just a little farther, girl._

She couldn't even work up excitement for the black mass of clouds ahead. It just seemed that the Gods would never finish punishing them today. Looking around, the storm stretched all the way across the horizon on both sides. There was no going around, and the Nadder was too tired to climb above it.

As they hit the edge of the storm, she began to feel the raindrops stinging her like pebbles. Winds began blowing the exhausted dragon around. She grimaced, feeling that there was a very real chance they wouldn't make it. Because, for Hiccup's sake, she couldn't turn back and wait for the storm to pass.

Like many of the younger Vikings, she had lost some of the old traditions. Raised in Berk, with the dragon raids happening her entire life, and hundreds of years before that, she had pretty much lost the belief that the Gods cared about them at all. _How could they care_, she thought, every time she saw a young widow crying as her husband was sent to Valhalla, or watched a Father pick a tiny form from a burned house.

But she was a desperate young woman now. She had discovered new, wondrous feelings in the past few days. She had realized that the thin boy she had ignored and insulted for years had a mind that made her think about more than just the next dragon raid. He had showed her a future of peace. Where things can be _built_, not destroyed. He had offered her that.

And she may never get to explore those feelings. And what about exploring _him_? The dragon was faltering in the winds. _Thunder and lightning_, she thought. She looked up.

"_THOR!_" She screamed. "THOR! HELP ME!" Her swollen throat choked her. Her tears were blown from her eyes by the wind and rain. "Heâ€ help him. Please." She slumped forwards, her strength spent. "Help

me." She muttered.

The rain slackened. The wind changed. It seemed to shift. Astrid looked ahead. The storm was there on both sides, but ahead of her, it wasâ€¦ _clearing_? The angry black clouds were swirling, changing to white, and lifting.

The wind blew from behind her now. The Nadder leveled off smoothly, her speed increasing slightly even as her wings slowed with fatigue.

Astrid looked around in wonder. This was no coincidence. Someoneâ€¦ perhaps Thor _himself_â€¦ had intervened. Someone was paying attention. Someone _cared_.

She laughed to the sky. "THANK YOU!" She could never doubt again.

She saw Dragon Island on the horizon.

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Odin pondered the scrying pool. It seems his son has taken an interest in these people. He knew Freya wouldn't behave, she never does. But Thor, nowâ€¦ what does he want here? What do this girl and boy mean to him?

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3. Secrets Revealed

****Secrets Revealed.****

Astrid landed in the open area where Fishlegs and his dragon were standing. They were both tired, and it wasn't the smoothest of landings. Grabbing the strap across her shoulder, she threw her leg over the Nadder's neck and slid down.

And kept going. Her knees buckled. Only by putting her arm out did she stop herself from going face first into the ground. Fishlegs and several other nearby Vikings ran to her. She knelt there, trying to lift the strap over her head.

One of the Vikings gently lifted the strap from her hand and took the bag. Fishlegs got hold of Astrid under her other arm.

"Get that to Berta." She said, and the man turned and ran up the beach. She stood up. Being freed of the satchel gave her just a bit more strength. "Thanks." She said to Fishlegs. "You didn't go with them?"

Fishlegs looked embarrassed. "Well, my dragon isn't the fastest, and she's tired. I only predicted a 30 percent chance of getting there alive."

Astrid nodded, and turned back to scratch her dragon. The poor thing was lying down, looking at her with half-open eyes. Her wings flopped loosely on the ground.

She turned to Fishlegs. "I'm going to see Hiccup. Can you get her a few fish? Then I think she wants a nap."

Fishlegs nodded as Astrid turned to go. She said over her shoulder; "And by the way— her name is _Stormfly_."

She got to where the cluster of people was around Hiccup's makeshift bed. Berta was digging through the satchel, pulling out things she needed.

Astrid came and kneeled down next to Hiccup's head. He looked pale and feverish. She bit her lip. Had she been fast enough? She watched Berta working with the healer bag. She had pulled out tiny bone needles and thread. Astrid watched her pull out several tiny clay pots, sealed with wax. Taking a flat spoon with a pointed handle, she pierced the wax seal, and opened the miniature pots.

She noticed Astrid watching. "It's another idea of Hiccup's, you know. Medicines could be made ahead of time, and sealed in these." She laid the small pot beside Hiccup's side. "Then you don't have to wait the hours it takes to make them when you need them." She reached back into the bag. "He's quite the clever young man."

Astrid stared at what Berta pulled out of the bag next. It looked like a large knife, or maybe a cleaver. It was polished, and thin. Along the bottom edge were extremely fine teeth, like a wood saw. Although small, it had the look of fine craftsmanship, even including engraving of flowers on the top of the blade. She recognized those flowers.

Astrid gulped. "Hiccup made that, too, didn't he?" Berta nodded. "He said it would be more accurate than lopping things off with a sword or an axe." The standard Viking method of amputation usually meant somebody grabbed a short sword and took their best shot at making a clean cut.

Berta waved to Astrid. "Astrid, you get above him and hold down his shoulders, no matter what." She looked around. "Stoick! Come here and hold his leg down." The massive chieftain kneeled by Berta, pressing down on Hiccup's thigh with both hands. His face was grim. Berta held Hiccup's knee with one hand and the saw with the other.

Astrid saw her close her eyes and mutter a prayer before starting. Astrid had been doing the same thing. Surely Thor would help him! Hiccup had proven himself worthy by his actions that dawn. The God of valor must sure be paying attention to the bravest Viking in the history of Berk.

She looked at Berta. Something seemed to slide into place in her brain. "Pray to Loki!" Stoick and Berta both looked at her. "Trust me." Astrid said "Loki. Do it."

Berta finished her prayer for guidance, opened her eyes, and lowered the saw. Astrid and Stoick pressed down on Hiccup. Astrid closed her eyes tightly as Berta began her grisly task.

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It seemed an eternity before Berta was finished. After the cutting, she had sewn arteries closed, and sewn together the excess skin at the base of the stump. She had used several different ointments and balms, mixed to prevent infection, help the pain, and start the healing process. She was putting a bandage around the end now, looking as weary as Astrid felt.

"We need to take the strap off soon, but I want to let things settle first." Berta informed them. "He needs to be kept warm to burn out infection." She looked over to where Astrid slumped over, her chin almost resting on her chest.

"Stoickâ€ take her somewhere to rest a while, please. We can't do anything but wait now."

Stoick nodded. Taking Astrid's shoulder, he lifted her to her feet. She promptly started sliding to her knees. Stoick picked her up, carrying her like a child to the fire where Gobber and he were staying.

As he walked, cradling her, she half opened her eyes to look up at him. "Chiefâ€ we can't lose him now. Iâ€ I just found him."

Stoick laid her carefully on a dried-out fur near his fire. He covered her with someone's jacket. "You and me both, girlâ€ you and me both."

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Astrid stirred. She was warm, and comfortable, andâ€ Her eyes shot open as she remembered the day. It was dark, and she was lying bundled up near Stoick, who sat talking with Gobber. She laid her head back down, needing a few minutes to gather her wits. She listened, since Stoick would have the latest news.

Gobber had just squatted down by the fire. "He's no changed, Stoick." He tried to smile; "But she says that's a good thing right now." He looked at Stoick's drawn face. "Take heart, man. Hiccup's always been tougher than you gave him credit for."

Stoick _snorted_ and shook his head. "That's not saying much, Gobber. I don't think I ever gave him credit for anything."

Gobber thought. Time to change the subject. He glanced over to Astrid, lying with her eyes closed. "Ah, Stoick. That Berta's a fair smart healer." He made his good hand into a claw, and scratched the air in front of him. "Didn't Astrid and her have a bit of a set-to some time back, though?"

Stoick leaned forward and stared into the fire. "Aye. Berta had been in shield-maiden training. She'd been giving Astrid pointers in her spare time."

Gobber scratched his cheek with his hook handâ€ carefully. "There's a story there, I bet."

Stoick nodded. "Not a good one, though, Gobber. She and Tomas had recently been betrothed. They were so happy together, it would sicken you. They were really taking advantage of the fact that betrothed are encouraged toâ€ ahemâ€ spend time together."

Stoick sighed "Then we had a dragon raid. Not even a big one, but a Nightmare got their shed, and was attacking the house. The two o' them come running out to kill it." Stoick sighed again. "The best story I could get was that Tomas was distracting the beast so Berta could get a good blow in. Wellâ€ she did, but she said she hesitated."

Stoick looked at Gobber with a haunted look in his eyes. "I got there first. There she was, covered in dragon guts and blood, clingin' to the charredâ€ thingâ€ that used to be Tomas. When I went to pick her up she grabbed her sword and tried to cut her own throat. I _swear_, Gobber, I never saw eyes so _dead_ on someone still breathing." He was silent a few moments. "I got her to Gothi, and we got a sleeping draught in her. And her handsâ€ she had almost cut her own fingers off fighting me for that blade."

He shrugged. "When she came out of the healer's a few days later, she hung up her sword. Astrid gave her a hard time about it. Astrid was so excited to fight, and called her coward for it. I don't think the two have spoken since."

Astrid lay there quietly. A tear ran down her cheek. _I didn't know all that. Forgive me._

Gobber rubbed his chin. "Hmmm. Ye notice that silver belt she wears all the time?" Stoick thought a second, and nodded. Gobber continued; "Hiccup started making that the day after. Spent a week on itâ€ fit for a Princess, it was. Snuck out one night and put it in her house. Never told no one."

Stoick's eyes were wide. "Gobberâ€ you don't need to keep remindin' me how much I don't know about me own son."

Gobber shook his head. "It's not that, Stoick. What you should know is how he really knows the people. Most just see his inventionsâ€ the ones thatâ€ once in a while burn the place down, yes. But the boy _listens_, Stoick."

Gobber smiled. "It's the attention he pays to things that amazes me. A few years ago, he made this mirror. Useless vanity, I said, waste o' time. He found out by grinding up a certain rock, he made a metal polish. Must'a spent a hundred hours polishing that. Worth a Chief's ransom, that was. That emperor in Rome they talk about might have such a thing. Looked like silver at the bottom of a bowl of clear water. Then he put a wood frame around it, and spent days carvin' these tiny, tiny flowers in it."

He elbowed Stoick. "I figured he was tryin' to impress some girl, but I never found out where it went. He never seemed that close to anyone." He snapped his fingers. "Hey! Y'know, Stoick, findin' him a wife _now_ will be easy. I've already heard some of the women talking."

Stoick blinked at him. He had worried about _ever_ marrying the boy off. Then his face fell. "Right now let's just keep him alive."

Gobber sighed. _At least I got his mind to stop worryin' a few minutes._

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Astrid let them know she was 'just waking up' by stretching and groaning. She sat up, rubbing her eyes, both for appearance and to wipe away any stray tears.

Stoick and Gobber looked over to her. Gobber half smiled. "Mornin' there, miss. He's all right." Gobber wasn't fooled. He had lost a hand and a leg, yes, but he hadn't lost his ears. Astrid had stopped snoring twenty minutes ago. Gobber and Astrid stared at each other for a time. Then he waved towards Hiccup. "Well, go on, lass."

She got up and walked towards the fire where Hiccup lay. She was a bit unsteady still. She tripped over a rock and almost fell by not paying attention. Her mind was trying to absorb what she had just heard. And for years, she had accused him of being stupid. The flight on Toothless a few nights ago had opened her eyes to so much. And what she had just heard— had she ever been right about anything?

She walked into the circle of the fire. Hiccup lay still as death. Sweat was trickling down his face. She looked around. Someone had pulled up a few logs for seating. A large pile of firewood was off to one side. Toothless was there, still watching. His ruined saddle and controls had been removed and placed to one side.

What was unusual was that Berta was half lying across the dragon's neck, rubbing it and crooning a child's lullaby to it.

She straightened up as Astrid lowered herself on the other side of Toothless, scratching his forehead. A little wuff of air is all that acknowledged her. Berta had a faraway look in her eyes. She looked quite tired.

She looked at Astrid. "I wouldn't have said it, but I was still scared of the beast this morning. The way he kept staring at— us." She traced a finger down a row of scales. "But then I thought that nobody had paid him any mind all day. He had a couple of cuts, and I put some balm on them." She shrugged. "I have no idea if it's any good. Nobody has ever given a damn about caring for dragons before. One of your friends came by and got him to eat a few fish." Berta had a small smile at that. "He was practically prying his mouth open. I'm surprised he kept all his fingers."

She looked towards Hiccup. "Does he really love the boy? Can dragons really feel that?" Berta's voice cracked with pain. "If we had known this before, would— we— I still— have—" She covered her face with her hands. Her shoulders shook.

Astrid walked around and knelt in front of her. Awkwardly, she wrapped her arms around Berta. Berta's arms wrapped around Astrid's back, and she wept openly against her chest.

Astrid choked down her own pain. "We didn't know. How could we know? We're Vikings, fighting is what we are." She stroked Berta's hair. "I guess it takes someone— different— to teach us." She looked over to Hiccup. "He's the worst Viking in seven generations, and he's smarter than all of us. And we never knew."

After a while, Berta sat up, wiping her eyes and sniffing. Astrid gently clasped her hands. Pulling them towards her, she turned the palms up, showing deep, puckered scars across the palms and thumbs. "I'm so sorry. I didn't _ask_. I didn't _think_." She looked straight into Berta's grey eyes. "Iâ€¦ I'll kiss your feet in the Great Hall at noon meal. I'll submit to any punishment you choose. I'llâ€¦"

Berta placed her hand, fingers spread slightly, over Astrid's mouth. "Hush. I was never mad at you. You're a warrior, Astrid, and that's fine. Even without dragons to fight, we'll always need to protect ourselves. I'm proud of your skills." She tilted her head and gave a slight smile. She moved her hand down to Astrid's chin, and turned her head gently to face the form by the fire. "But now, sometimes, try to think with your _heart_."

She released Astrid and stood up. "_Now_, be a good little warrior and help me check him."

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Odin went to his chambers. As he entered, he looked out upon the vista of mountains outside. Weather was no issue here, and the entire wall was open to the sky. He sat down in a great chair facing the open wall. He thought.

A hand rested on his shoulder. Followed by another. The hands moved to massage his neck in small, circular movements that were known to bring comfort. The owner of the hands waited quietly.

Odin sighed. "I'm sorry I'm not better company tonight, dear."

Frigg, wife of Odin, smiled. "You worry too much. Didn't I tell you it would work out?" She walked around and sat on Odin's lap. She rested her head on his broad shoulder, and placed a hand over his heart, feeling the same beat she had felt for a thousand years. "The battle is won, dear. The monster is gone. What is the problem now?"

Odin's eyes narrowed. "Just the follies of youth. When we were young, and placed many of the things on Midgard, we thought we were every bit the all-powerful Gods the humans thought we were. We tried to outdo each other. We created horrible creatures, and unleashed many disasters on the helpless worlds. We waged war all across the nine realms, uncaring of what we did to the real owners. All to prove who was the strongest."

He paused for a moment. "And then we got wiserâ€¦ just a bit, at least. Then there was the guilt at what we had left scattered about the realms. So we started guiding people. There was the Age of Heroes, when we selected warriors, and aided them, to fix our mistakes."

He looked into his wife's eyes. "But that's old news. We've mostly cleaned up our mess, and there is less need for heroes now. And that is making Freya very angry." He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "The boy I told you aboutâ€¦ he has performed greater than even I imagined. One of the last great dangers is gone. I would reward him. I would give him the simple gift he truly desiresâ€¦ peace." He

sighed again. "But I fear his trials are not finished yet. Something is in motion that will sweep the entire world, and he isâ€¦ uniquelyâ€¦ qualified to stop it."

Frigg ran a fingertip down his cheek. "What about the girl?"

Odin laughed lightly. "Leave it to you, dear one. There are no secrets kept from you, it seems. You are the Goddess of Love, indeed! No matter what else happens." Then his face grew serious again. "It seems everyone in Aasgard is involved with this young man. Do you intend to step in, also? I warn youâ€¦ Freya will take him if you so much as blink."

Frigg kissed his neck. "Then I won't blink. I can have her, then?"

Odin smiled. "Very wellâ€¦ I will help, if I can, in whatever you choose to do." He placed his hand on her cheek. "Besides, you're the only one I truly trust." And he spoke the truth, as always. Thor was hotheaded, Loki changed allegiance like people changed clothes, Freya was greedy beyond belief, and even Heimdall would be the eyes and ears for the one who bribed him the most. Less famous Aasgardians lined up with whoever they favored at the time, sometimes for true belief, and sometimes for the power they thought to obtain. But Friggâ€¦ beautiful Friggâ€¦ believed only that a person was not destined to be unloved forever. No politics, no grab for powerâ€¦ just love.

Frigg kissed him soundly. She truly loved the man, and he understood her. Then she slid off his lap, and walked towards the door. "Thank you, my love."

Odin raised an eyebrow. "Where are you heading now?"

Frigg said over her shoulder; "To find Sif, of course! There's no one better if I'm going to deal with a shield-maiden!"

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Berta waved a hand. "You take off the old bandages. There's clean ones in the top of the bag, and water in the pot by the fire." She knelt by his head, taking a linen cloth and wiping his forehead and face, checking to see how hot he was.

"Eep!"

Berta snapped her head around. "What is it?"

She saw Astrid kneeling beside Hiccup. She was holding down the edge of the fur with both hands, as if the wind was trying to blow it away. Her face was red enough to show even in the partial darkness.

"Heâ€¦ _he's_ _naked_!"

Berta blinked. "So? I couldn't leave those bloodied clothes on him. Go ahead."

Astrid shook her head violently. "But he'sâ€¦ _naked_!"

Now Berta understood. She smiled. "Well, go on. Take a peek. See if he's good husband material. I had to clean him up, and he's got nothing to be ashamed about. He's going to make some lass very happy." Astrid just stared at her with huge eyes.

"_Gods_, girl! You just fought a dragon half the size of Berk, and now you tell me you're too scared to look at a naked man?" Berta leaned over to ask in a low voice; "Didn't you ever go up to the stream in the summer to watch the boys bathe?" It looked like Astrid's eyes were about to pop out of her head.

Berta got up. "Very well. Come over on this side." Astrid moved very quickly. "You just sit there and hold up the cover, and I'll do it."

Astrid held the fur off Hiccup's body. She looked off towards the beach. Berta removed the bandages and threw them into the fire. She frowned. There was quite a bit of leakage. She started to spread some more of the healing ointment on the end of his leg.

"Astrid? What's your interest in him now? You never paid any attention to him before. If I remember, you were always with the ones who teased him."

Astrid still stared out to sea. Her mouth set in a firm line. _You don't have to remind me,_ she thought.

"Is it because he's a hero now? Because he'll be famous? That _somehow_, a man measured up to the high standards of _the_ Astrid Hofferson?"

Astrid heard the touch of bitterness in the voice. She looked around at Berta, still wiping salve on the wound. Her voice didn't want to work. She mouthed the word a few times before getting it out. "No."

Berta looked over at her and raised an eyebrow. Astrid cleared her throat. "A few nights ago, I found out about his dragon. I was going to tell Stoick that his son was a traitor." She closed her eyes at her own stupidity. "Then heâ€¦ sort ofâ€¦ kidnapped me. And took me on a flight." She looked straight into Berta's face. "It was wonderful. The sky was soâ€¦ _huge_. And I was so small. I saw the entire village tiny enough to set in the palm of my hand. I think I started to understand the freedom he felt up there." She glanced at Hiccup's face. "And he wasn'tâ€¦ _Hiccup_ up there. He was sure of himself. He made jokes and talked to Toothlessâ€¦ a _Night Fury_â€¦ like you would your mother at the Great Hall over a meal. Up thereâ€¦ he has no fear at all."

She closed her eyes and looked down. "That night, in bed, I thought about how I always felt that killing dragons was how I could be useful to Berk. Then I thought about Hiccup, and his dream to stop the war _forever_."

She looked at Berta with a tear running down her cheek. "_I'm_ the useless one, Berta, not him. All I was going to do was keep the war going." She choked. "I'm not worthy of _him_ now."

Berta looked into the watery blue eyes. She frowned in thought a bit.

Then she spoke. "Astrid, he'll be famous now. And famous peopleâ€¦ they always have enemiesâ€¦ who have to prove something." She looked down at the sleeping face. "He's not much of a swordsman, I have to admit. That means he'll need help. Just like this morning, he can't do it all alone. He needs people who believe him."

She looked back at Astrid, her head tilted, and the ghost of a smile on her face. "They say the Norns weave the entire history of the world into a great tapestry. Each person is a thread in it. Some threads run the same direction, but far apart, never meeting. And some threads go in different directions, and no matter how long they are, they only cross at one point, then they separate, never to meet again. Butâ€¦ some threads run beside each other. They weave in and out of events and other people, but they are always side by side."

She plucked the covering from Astrid's hands, and tucked it under Hiccup's side. "Which thread are you, Astrid?"

Berta stood up. "There's nothing more to do for a few hours. I would like to get just a bit of rest. I can hardly stand. Should I go get someone to watch, just in case?"

Astrid shook her head. "No, I can watch. I've slept enough."

Berta walked away. "I'll be near Stoick if you need anything."

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Astrid sat there, thinking, and staring at Hiccup's pale face. The last two days had changed herâ€¦ well, everybody's world. Would he still be the same Hiccup when he woke up? She sighed. Old Hiccup, new Hiccupâ€¦ she didn't know either one, really.

She went over the last five years of their lives. There was a time when all the children ran and played together. Hiccup's difference wasn't so obvious then. He couldn't outrun her, or outwrestle Snotlout, but he didn't seem so bad.

When they were all about ten, they were practicing with wooden swords. Not as toys, even then. As Vikings, they were supposed to begin learning valuable fighting skills as young as possible. Hiccup wasn't growing as fast as the rest of them. He definitely wasn't learning weapons as fast. Snotlout, especially, loved knocking Hiccup's sword away and beating him until he bruised. The rest of them usually went a little easy on him.

Then she remembered when they were twelve. That was the change in everything. Astrid was cleaning her new axe. It was still a little heavy and awkward, but she practiced every day until her arms cramped and refused to move anymore. She was good, and getting better every week. She was going to be out killing dragons while the others were still figuring out which end of a sword to grab.

She watched Hiccup and Snotlout in the clearing. Snotlout had chosen the biggest sword he could lift. His current skill level meant he gave a great grunt, and heaved the heavy blade around in an arc. Hiccup, on the other hand, had chosen something more fitting, a blade that really was more of a long dagger than anything else. He also had

picked up a small shield, lighter than the standard one.

They were standing there. Snotlout swung his sword around, and Hiccup dodged nimbly. Astrid had to admit that he was good at sizing up his opponents, and figuring out a strategy that would give him an advantage, despite his size.

"Stand still, you little _runt_!"

"Oh, like that would ever happen."

"You don't even know how to use that thing!"

"Sure I do. The pointy end goes in the other guy."

Astrid could see what Snotlout was too mad and stupid to notice. Snotlout was wearing himself out, with each swing getting weaker and more unstable, while Hiccup danced just out of range.

Finally, Snotlout yelled and swung a wide, wobbly shot. Hiccup crouched low, and brought his shield up under the blade. He swung up, and the shield threw the blade upwards. Snotlout's tired hands slipped off the handle, and the sword flew off to the side.

Hiccup stood up, stepped forward, and gently touched Snotlout's chest with the point of the dagger. Astrid noticed that Hiccup even had his pinky extended.

"You, sir, are dead." Hiccup sheathed his dagger. The twins had quit hitting each other to gawk at them. He extended his hand to show there were no hard feelings.

Snotlout looked down at the offered hand. He looked up at Hiccup's smile.

Then he hit Hiccup in the faceâ€¦ hard. He hit him again, and when Hiccup fell backwards, he started kicking him.

Astrid jumped up. Snotlout found himself staring at the sharp edge of the girl's axe.

"Stop that, Snotlout! He beat you fair and proper!" Astrid was prepared to give him a good mark for his stupidity right then.

Snotlout looked at her. "Why are you sticking up for that creep? You like him or something?"

Astrid ignored that last part. "We watched him beat you with your wonderful great sword you've been bragging about. He doesn't deserve to get beat up because _you_ don't know how to fight. He's right. You'd be _dead_."

Snotlout just '_hummped_' while he walked over, picked up his sword, and left the clearing. Astrid extended a hand down to Hiccup. He weakly grabbed her hand, and she heaved him to his feet. His lip and nose were bloody. He mumbled a low "Thanks" and left quickly.

A few days later, at the clearing they were training at, Astrid was checking her axe for rust or dings. Hiccup walked up to her. Astrid

looked up. He was smiling, and held out a small blue flower. This flower was about the only beautiful thing that grew on Berk. It only came out during a few weeks in summerâ€¦ or the fleeting few days that passed for summer here. It was found only at the highest points, so they were seldom seen in the village.

Hiccup held it out to her. "Iâ€¦ I thâ€¦ thought you might like it because it's the sâ€¦ same color as your eyes."

She looked up at him.

Suddenly, they were surrounded by all the others, laughing and making jokes.

"Hooooo, flowers!"

"Astrid's got a secret boyfriend!"

"Don't squeeze him too hard, his head'll pop right off!"

To this day, Astrid didn't know why she did what she did next. Maybe it was the fact that as the best fighter of the group, she was considered the leader. Maybe she was embarrassed by the taunts. Maybe it would have been much, much different had he done this in private. She didn't know.

Astrid stood up, hands on hips, and looked around with a deadly glare. "I don't have a boyfriend, secret or otherwise. And I'm really disappointed in you if you think I'd date â€¦ a talking fishbone!" She then stormed off.

Yes, that was the day, she sighed, staring at the face reflected in the fire. Starting that evening, he began eating away from the others. He became more withdrawn. He avoided any of them whenever possible, and quit training with them at all. How could she possibly ever make that up to him? Now it would haunt her again. She saw those flowers every morning, carved into the frame of the most amazing mirror, hanging in her room.

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Later, she looked up at the sky. She had dried her tears for the scared little boy who tried to give her a flower. She swore to Odin she would find a way to make it up to him.

The moon was nearing its peak. It was approaching midnight.

She went over her talk with Berta again in her mind, and couldn't help but smile at Berta's taunting.

She looked around. Nobody was watching. Nobody was near them. Nobody at all.

Maybe just a peek.

She leaned over and gingerly grabbed the edge of the furs.

Suddenly, there was a pale glow from the area outside the fire. Astrid snatched back her hand.

"Oh, please! Don't let me interrupt you." came from out of the darkness.

4. Visitor in the Dark

****Visitor In the Dark.****

As the glow faded away, Astrid saw a shadow approach the fire. She leaned back against the log. Her hand drifted towards the handle of her axe.

It was a man. Fairly tall, with dark hair, and a handsome face, if one was interested in such things. He had the slim build of a man who did not wield heavy weapons for a living. He walked into the area near them. Astrid could see he was dressed in a fancy green coat, black pants, and strange, tall black leather boots. He carried no open weapon, but her hand slid around the axe haft anyway. There was no way he was from Berk.

Then he stopped by Toothless. Strangely, the dragon made no move. The Night Fury lifted his head and merely sniffed the man. The man then kneeled down and scratched the dragon on the cheek.

"Your kind was always my favorite, you know." He said in a rich voice. Astrid's eyes were wide. The blasted dragon was purring. Maybe he wasn't a threat, or maybe he was even more dangerous.

"Who are you?" Astrid asked. She was at a disadvantage sitting on the ground. She was trying to slide a foot up into a position where she could stand quickly. "Tell me! If I yell, there'll be a hundred men here to take care of you."

The man was still scratching the dragon, not even looking at her. "Yell away, sweetling." He stood up, and faced the direction of the campfires down the beach.

He cupped his hands around his mouth. "HELLO!" he shouted. "I HAVE A BIG SWORD! I'M GOING TO CUT THIS BOY INTO TINY BITS!" He lowered his hands and faced Astrid. "See? We are quite alone here."

He stepped over and stood by Astrid's feet. His hands were on his hips. His smile gave Astrid shivers. "Now." He said. "If we've gotten all that useless threatening gesture idea out of the way, can we start our negotiations?"

Astrid gulped back her fear. "Who are you? What are you? Are you a witch?"

The man slowly settled down into a cross-legged sitting position in front of her. He still smiled. "I've been called far worse." He rubbed his chin. "Tell me, girl. Why did you tell them to pray to me?"

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Things got blurry for a second. Astrid's breath gasped as she tried to get the air she needed suddenly. Still trying to understand her new-found belief that the Gods sometimes actually listened, she wasn't really prepared to be sitting down with one. And Loki! The

most dangerous one of all.

Loki watched the emotions play across the girl's face. If he wasn't so pressed for time, he could be having quite a bit of fun here. These people are so easy to impress.

He snapped his fingers in front of Astrid's face. "Hello. I really need you to pay attention here. We don't have all night." He watched her eyes slowly focus on him. Her hand had let go her axe, but her hands were both twitching, unsure of what to do. Astrid finally, slowly, nodded.

"Good." He said. He held up a hand, palm up. A small red bag appeared. He closed his hand over it. "Now listen, dear one. Your friend is dying. He is poisoned from within. He will die slowly, in a great deal of pain, before the sun sets tomorrow."

He sat up straight, hands on his knees. "Now, what will you give me for his life, little one?" He closed his eyes. He could _smell_ the pain radiating from the young woman. The agony is so _delicious_.

Astrid was slowly slipping into shock. The world was tilting. The air was like trying to breathe water. _This is what drowning must feel like,_ she thought. She had reached that point where she couldn't accept any more.

Loki reached over and lightly slapped her. "You must stay with me, now."

Astrid focused. She pushed herself upright against the log. Her mind was racing. _How do you bribe a God?_ "I don'tâ€| haveâ€| we're notâ€| butâ€|"

Loki waved a hand randomly. "Humph. Gold and trinkets have no meaning for me. Wealth for its own sake is only a pursuit for those of the realms." He smiled, this time a more malicious grin. "Butâ€| a maiden has one gift she can give a man, doesn't she?"

Astrid froze. _What?_ She stared at Loki. Slowly, his eyes travelled from her face to her feet, and back again. She felt naked, and no more to him than a yak quarter hanging in the butcher's shed.

She steeled her nerves. She had promised that whatever Hiccup needed, she would do. But she feared that Loki would extract a higher price from her soul than he ever could from her body.

Why would he want her? She was drawn and bruised from head to toe. Her clothes were torn and stained. Her face was grimy, her hair was a mess, and she stank to Asgard itself. The word _alluring_ had never been in her vocabulary. She didn't particularly consider herself any sort of prize worthy of the Gods at that moment. _I will pay for every moment of pride I have felt in my entire life. So be it._

She reached up and moved a strand of hair from her eyes. She _smiled_, although it felt like the grim smile of one stepping to their doom. "I will give you that for him." she stated simply.

Loki leaned forward. He placed a hand on the log on either side of her. His face was mere inches from hers.

He smiled that horrible grin again. "You would."

Astrid tried to look defiant. "Gladly."

She saw, for the first time, Loki's face _soften_. "I think not so gladly." he whispered. "But willingly. And that makes all the difference."

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He was standing on his feet so suddenly Astrid jerked in surprise. Loki held down a hand. "Well, come on, girl! He won't wait forever." She took his hand shakily. _Funny_, she thought, _his hand felt as warm as any person's_. She was pulled quickly to her feet.

She was standing in front of him now. He reached out and there was a silver goblet in his hand. He whispered a few words over it, and then there was boiling water in it. As she watched, he opened his other hand. The small red bag was there again. He dropped it into the goblet. There was a faint bluish glow from it. He swirled it around a few times, still whispering, and the boiling died down, as well as the light. He held the goblet towards Astrid. "He must drink this now, before its power fades."

She reached out with both hands, since she was still not very steady. She stepped over and knelt by Hiccup. She lifted his head with her left hand as she guided the goblet to his lips with her right. She worked the edge of the goblet past his lips, trying not to spill everything. Finally, a few drops went into his mouth. As if he were awake, he began swallowing, draining the goblet as she tilted it upwards. When it was empty, he sighed and relaxed again. She dropped the goblet beside him, kissed his forehead, and lowered his head carefully back onto the furs.

She stood up again and faced Loki. Her hand was on the buckle to her spiked leather skirt. "I made a bargain. I will pay my share now."

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Loki smiled at her, but now, it was _different_. Instead of the disdainful sneer he had been wearing, it was now the smile that reminded her of meeting a friend in the Great Hall. What changed in him? Then she thought; what had changed in _her_?

He waved a hand. "I have already taken what I needed. When I am reduced to blackmail to get women to my bed, little one, I will give it up entirely." He walked over and sat down on the log. He reached out and patted the spot beside him. "Nowâ€¦ come sit down, Astrid. We have a lot of gossip to catch up on and not much time."

Astrid tried to put everything together. Why _all_ that? What did he really want? _She was thinking so hard, she practically stumbled over to the log. She needed both hands to steady herself as she sat beside Loki. She looked at him, bewildered.

Loki looked out towards the fire. "Tell me, do they still tell stories about _Thessa_?"

Astrid blinked. She had to adjust a moment to the sudden change of subject. "_Thessa_? Thessa the _Dragoneess_?"

Loki nodded. "What do you know about her?"

Astrid was still lost. "Well, she lived a hunâ€¦ um, about two hundred years ago. She was considered very beautiful. I remember her because they say she carried a pair of daggers, with dragon's tooth handles, that some claim were made in Aasgard itself."

Loki rubbed his chin. "Pretty accurate so far. Any more?"

Astrid looked at him with raised eyebrows. "I don't know. There's so many tales. She really did exist. They say she cut off the hand of a man that grabbed her butt. That she killed several suitors." Astrid waved her hand. "Then there's the stories the men tell in Mead Hall when they've had too much, and try to out-do each other. No one knows how much, if any, is true."

Loki laughed lightly. His voice was really pleasant. Astrid found herself relaxing a bit, in spite of her fear.

Loki leaned in and said; "If you took a hundred warriors, and gave them an unlimited amount of ale, they could not tell any story that came close to her real life."

He winked at Astrid. "And she's the only woman I ever loved."

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Astrid sat there, her mouth open, her eyes frozen on Loki's face. He smiled and looked back to the fire.

"Hmmm. Well, maybe you should know a few things. Yes, she was extremely beautiful. And she would talk to no man who couldn't defeat her in a duel. Courting her was the most incredible experience I ever knew."

He looked at Astrid and smiled. "_And_ the most dangerous. Some mornings I woke up and she was in the mood for loving. And some mornings I woke up to her trying to run a knife through my chest." Astrid noticed he looked downright _wistful_. "And some morningsâ€¦ it was both at once."

Loki sighed. "She did claim no mortal man was good enough for herâ€¦ and I _do_ love a challenge. I had never felt so _alive_!"

Astrid thought of something. "She never married. But some tales say she had a child."

Loki grinned at her. "Yes. One loses track of things over centuries. But I found the last known of that bloodline. It was a dark-haired beauty named Valka."

Astrid gasped. "Vâ€¦Vaâ€¦ _Valka_?" She was having difficulty breathing again.

Loki winked at her. "Yes. She married some Chieftain somewhere. _Stoick_, I think his name was."

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Astrid was vaguely aware of someone talking to her. Someone was shaking her. Words started reaching her brain.

"â€¦ on, now. As pleasant as holding a pretty girl is, we really don't have time for this."

Astrid opened her eyes. So much for it being a dream. Loki was holding her up, and looking concerned. "Ah, you're awake. Sorryâ€¦ might have been a bit much for one shot."

Astrid blinked. "_Hiccup_â€¦ Hiccup isâ€¦ heâ€¦"

Loki laughed. "Yes, dear. Hiccup is the descendant of Thessa andâ€¦ _myself_."

Astrid pushed herself up on her elbows. "Butâ€¦ that meansâ€¦ you already _knew_ that." She got shakily to her knees. "You knew that when you _got_ here." She stood up and faced Loki, just as the last piece fit into place. "You intended to help him all the time, _didn't_ you?"

She shouted; "_Then Why in Hel did you put me through that_?" She was forgetting her fear, filling with rage at the fact that he had her crawlâ€¦ no, _beg_â€¦ to give herself to him to save Hiccup.

Without thinking, she swung and hit Loki in the mouth as hard as she could. "You _bastard_!"

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Before she had even finished swinging, part of her brain tried to warn her. _I just punched out a God! He's going to killâ€¦ my familyâ€¦ everyone! _

She dropped to her knees, head bent, hands clasped together in front of her. She was shaking terribly. The old stories of those who had incurred the wrath of the Gods ran through her mind. None of them ended well.

But all she had heard wasâ€¦ _laughter_? After a few moments more, she dared to look up. Loki had moved away, now kneeling by Hiccup's side. He was looking at the boy, smiling slightly. His hand reached out, and with the gentlest touch, brushed his hair away from his closed eyes. Loki looked around towards Astrid. There was a sadness in his eyes.

"He's very lucky, you know. The blood of Asgard does not alwaysâ€¦ mixâ€¦ properly with most on Midgard." He traced a finger across Hiccup's forehead, and down one cheek. "Most are driven mad by visions. Some have to be put down like an injured animal. Some justâ€¦ fade away, staring _elsewhere_ until they starve to death." Loki sat back. "But sometimes, they find a strength. They _embrace_ the difference. Those are the ones that change the face of the world."

Astrid slowly crawled on her hands and knees to them. She looked into Loki's eyes. "Why?"

Loki looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

Astrid rocked back and sat on her heels. "Why do it? If it causes so much suffering, whyâ€¦" _there really was no other word._ "â€¦breed with us at all?"

Loki sighed. "When the war spilled over into Midgard, it was at its peak. We unleashed forces beyond anything anyone had dared before. Whole areas, hundreds of miles across, are now lifeless desert from the weapons we used on each other." Loki leaned back and drew his knees up. "The losses were horrendous on all sides. We thought to use the peoples of the realms to aid our armies. But Midgardâ€¦ you were little more than a smarter kind of animal thenâ€¦ living in caves, and killing each other with rocks. You never advanced."

Loki waved a clenched fist at Astrid. "But you had such _potential_!" There was the touch of Aasgard about the place. You were the closest to us in appearance. You were clever when _given_ a new idea. So we made it happen." He relaxed a little. He placed a finger under Astrid's chin and lifted her face.

"But every thing you builtâ€¦ everything you learnedâ€¦ you turn to mayhem. For every hammer you make, you make ten swords. For every fishing boat you build, you build five warships. Your entire race was on a path of self-destruction. Siege engines, catapultsâ€¦ _everything_ you learned, you turned to death."

"So we decided toâ€¦ _inject_â€¦ if you forgive me for saying, new blood into the race. You needed a new _kind_ of idea, if you wanted to survive." He moved until his eyes were inches from Astrid's. "Tell meâ€¦ without Hiccup, what would your people be doing?"

Astrid swallowed. "Fighting dragons foreverâ€¦ dyingâ€¦ killing." She whispered.

Loki sat back up. "Exactly. And that is why he is here. Someone must cut a new path through the forest. And Midgard is pretty much incapable of doing that on its own."

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Loki stood up. He offered Astrid a hand, and pulled her to her feet. "And as for why I demanded a payment from you, hear me now. Dark forces are beginning to stir. He will need alliesâ€¦ friendsâ€¦ people he can _trust_."

Loki took both her hands in his. "You do not find out these things by asking senseless questions. Only by feeling the _pain_ of you, _yourself_ making the choice, could I trust him with you. If you had failed in that, how could you be counted upon in real danger?"

He looked up. "My time is short."

Astrid frowned. "But you're aâ€¦ _God_! Why do you keep talking about _time_?"

Loki smiled. "I'm not the only God involved here. Freya wants your young man. I believe several of her Valkyries are watching even now. We are protected for the moment."

Astrid gasped. Her hand went to her mouth, and she bit her knuckles until they bled. _No! Not them! They've come for him!_

She choked; "Butâ€| you gave himâ€|" _Dammit, breathe, girl!_ "He'll liveâ€| _won't_ he?"

Loki put a hand on her shoulder. "He is safe for now. Calm yourself. Even Freya has to follow _some_ rules." He tilted his head and looked at her closely. "Besides, aren't you a shield-maiden? Isn't that your greatest desire? To be chosen as a Valkyrie? The bravest of the brave? Chooser of the slain?"

He smiled. "Have you started your training yet?"

Astrid shook her head. "No. In a few months, when I turn sixteen, I get a tutor."

Loki smiled even broader. "Then you may not know." He leaned in, and whispered in her ear, barely loud enough to hear. "To be chosen as a Valkyrie, a shield-maiden must remain _chaste_â€| _unblemished_â€| _unviolated_â€| _un_â€|"

Astrid gasped and jerked away, face red. "_Okay_! I get the sketching! _No men!_" She froze, dropping her hands to her sides. She looked down at Hiccup. "Noâ€| no men." she whispered.

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Loki brushed dust off of his jacket. "Well, I've really enjoyed our little chat. You must stop by for some mead sometime." He smiled. "Ohâ€| sorry. You'd have to be dead for that."

For all she had learned this night, he could still draw a smile from her. She thought a second. "Ummm, Loki?" She looked into his face. "I don't get it. You've beenâ€| wellâ€| _nicer_ than I thought you were. I mean, you're the God ofâ€|"

Loki raised a palm to her. "Darkness? Lies? Chaos? Destruction?" He smiled. "They fill your head with all the old tales of the Prophecy of Ragnarok still, don't they?"

Astrid nodded, confused again.

Loki grinned and rubbed his hands together. "Oh, yes. About how I, the devious trickster, will lead our ancient enemies, the giants, into Asgard. This is only after, mind you, that Freya has filled her halls with Heroes of Midgard. Then Odin and I kill each other, Asgard falls, and your realm is plunged into destruction, darkness, and a severe lack of mead."

He looked at Astrid. "Does that about sum it up?"

Astrid stared at him open-mouthed. Then she slowly nodded. "Does that mean that it's all just aâ€| story?"

Loki gave a short, mirthless laugh. "No, my dear. It is completely _true!_" Then his face became serious. "The part they don't tell you is that _I_ _don't_ want to do it!_"

Astrid was stunned. Speechless, she could only stare at him with huge eyes as she tried to overturn a lifetime of teachings.

Loki winked at her. "Look, if you take the prophecy as written, there are so many things that have to happen at certain times. But what if they don't?"

He began pacing back and forth. "If Odin truly believed that I wanted to bring about Ragnarok, he would have my head on a golden tray for his morning meal." He began counting off points on his fingers. "Freya will have her Hall of Heroes filled to the last place! Oh, come on! If I was going to attack, I would have done it centuries ago! Why would I wait for her to gather forces against me?" He counted another finger. "I know it will bring about my death, so why would I want to start anything?"

He looked back to the stunned girl. "No, my dear one, the prophecy is quite true. And my task is to make sure it never happens." He winked. "Besides! the dead are out of my power. I can only torture the living. It would take away all of my fun!"

He stepped closer to Astrid. "Listen closely. The best way to frustrate Freya is to deny her the souls she needs to fill her Hall of Heroes at Valhalla. This young man is very valuable to me, and not only because he carries my blood. You seem smart, now. Tell me why."

Astrid thought. Her mouth worked. Her eyes were narrowed to slits. She glanced at Hiccup lying peacefully by the fire!

"Peace. He! he brings! peace." She looked to Loki's face, her eyes wide. "He stopped the war! He could stop all the war!"

Loki nodded, smiling. "Yes, you begin to see the larger sketching, don't you?"

Astrid wobbled on her feet. Loki guided her by the arm and sat her on the log nearest Hiccup. She was gasping for air again. She thought herself such a fighter! Such a warrior! She suddenly felt very small again. She was a stupid, skinny nothing in this matter. When Gods fought over him, what could she possibly do?

"How can I! what!" She stuttered.

Loki knelt in front of her, hands on her shoulders. "You're not alone in this. You just help us with any mortal problems. You already know my step-brother is watching you. You have help." He smiled. "Besides, you should know by now, the person Hiccup needs the most protection from is himself!"

Astrid gave a weak smile. "I can do that."

Loki nodded. "Now tell me! why have them pray to me?"

Astrid shrugged. "It just seemed right." She waved a hand at the sleeping hiccup. "Bad as it sounds, I don't think Thor ever paid any notice of him. His entire life seemed to be filled with chaos and destruction. I figured that if any God was paying the least bit of attention to him, it would be! you."

Loki stood up. "Good. The right thing for the wrong reason, but good none the less. Do not feel bad for such thoughts. He surprised everyone this day, even Odin himself." He looked up to see the moon passing its peak. All his magic could only do so much.

He smiled to the sky. "We're still good friends, you know."

Astrid looked up, confused again. _Gods, how his mind skipped around_. "What? _Who_?"

Loki looked down at her. "_Thessa_", of course. She stops by now and then to try and run a knife through me." He winked and sneered wickedly; "And for me toâ€¦ run something through her."

Astrid thought she had lost the decency to blush at all this night, but felt her cheeks grow warm still.

Loki frowned, and began patting his jacket, like he was looking for something he forgot. "Ah." He pulled out an object wrapped in gold cloth. He tossed it to Astrid.

He turned and began walking away the same direction he arrived. Toothless merely tracked him with his eyes.

Astrid unwrapped the cloth from what he had absently thrown to her. She gasped.

It was a dagger. Impossibly thin. The metal gave strange images of fire reflected in its blade. The handle was a dragon's tooth, tapering from the hilt to a curved point. It was an incredibly beautiful weapon. _Was it really_â€¦|

Loki's voice came to her out of the darkness. "She wants that back, I'll have you know. She says to use it to spice up your love life!"

The glow returned for a few seconds, then died again.

5. Home Again

****Home Again.****

The morning sun brought back activity to the makeshift camp. Vikings stirred, Stoick steeled himself for another day of this mess, and Gobber complained about the lack of ale here. Berta woke up, and immediately headed towards her young patient. Stoick watched her go, wanting to follow, but was faced with people waiting for orders.

Berta got to Hiccup, and noticed Astrid had fallen asleep. Cursing under her breath, she kneeled to check Hiccup's condition. His forehead felt warm, but no more so than anyone else sleeping under furs next to a roaring fire. He wasn't sweating anymore, which seemed a bit odd, considering. Removing the bandages from his leg, there was almost no leakage. The swelling looked a little better where her stitches had pieced together the end. She was happy about that, but having seen severe wounds before, this was almost _too_ good. Using some more ointment, she bandaged the leg back up and tried to get

Hiccup to take a bit of water. She got a few sips past his lips, and hoped he would come to soon. He would need food to help heal, and there wasn't a lot of him to start with.

She looked up. On Hiccup's other side, the Night Fury still stared. She leaned over. "He's getting better, dragon. I think he's going to be just fine. Don't worry." Toothless gave a short whine.

Then she looked down. Between the dragon's paw and the boy lay an odd silver goblet. Berta picked it up. It was covered in strange runes, some of which she didn't recognize. There was some sort of powder coating the inside. She sniffed, and immediately jerked her head back from the intense odor. Curious now, she looked at Hiccup, the goblet, and towards the dragon. The beast merely blinked at her. She thought. The dragon would have let no one harm the boy, and Astrid couldn't have had this, but somehow, someone had possibly given something to Hiccup. Frowning, she put the goblet in her bag. Something was odd, and maybe Gothi should have a look at this. Hiccup seemed to be healing faster than natural, and she was no believer of coincidence.

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Snotlout landed near the other dragons. He jumped off, patted the head of the Nightmare, and ran to report to Stoick. The first fishing boats were coming out of the fog. The Nightmare settled down with the others.

Stoick and Gobber were sending off some other men when Snotlout walked up. "Chief, the first boats are here!" He waved an arm out to sea. "We anchored outside Helheim's Gate last night. Even with dragons, it wasn't safe to go through at night. There's some smaller boats coming later, but these were the fastest."

Stoick nodded. "Good. Well done." He turned to Gobber. "We need to get Hiccup on the first boat now. Aarnold the shipbuilder says that there are two longboats almost ready. Just a rudder and some rigging is all they lack. Get him and his men back fast. Those boats would help."

He turned back to Snotlout. "Did they bring any supplies?" Snotlout nodded. "Yes, Chief. Food, blankets, and some furs. Oh, and some fishing gear to catch fish here." Stoick walked towards the beach, and Snotlout took that as a dismissal. He ran towards Hiccup's area.

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She was being shaken again. Wasn't this dreamâ€¦| noâ€¦| nightmare over yet?

"Wake up, you stupid girl! I told you to call me!"

Astrid stirred fitfully. "Nâ€¦| no. Please. I'll do what you want."

Berta reined in her anger. She shook Astrid more gently. "Astrid. Wake up."

Astrid's eyes popped open. She jerked up, pushing herself against the

log. Her head darted all around. They finally focused on Berta.
"Hiccup?"

Berta nodded. "He's doing fine. Better than fine, I'd say." She leaned down closer to Astrid's face. "Tell me, who else was here last night?"

Astrid wasn't fully awake, but realized she couldn't tell the truth. She shook her head. "I didn't see another person here at all after you left." She wasn't really lying to her. You can't lump Gods in with ordinary people, can you?

Berta looked at her. Accepting this for now, she pointed towards the beach. "Boats are coming in. Stoick wants Hiccup on the fastest one right now."

Astrid stood up. "I'll get him there." She looked around. "There'd better be plenty of room, though. Toothless will be going with him, whether we say so or not." The dragon was sitting with his head scanning the area, noting the flurry of activity.

Berta went to gather up her gear, as Snotlout trotted up. "Astrid! Is heâ€| okay?"

She nodded. "Fine, Snotlout. Well, as fine as he can be. Let's get him to the boat."

Two Vikings ran towards them. They had taken some vests, and run a couple of poles through them, to make a litter to carry Hiccup away. As they approached, Toothless rose up on his legs, leaning over Hiccup, growling.

Astrid stepped in front of them. "Whoa, wait." She glanced back over her shoulder. The dragon's eyes were narrowed, his ears back. She looked at the two men. "Just leave that, please. I think Toothless is a bit touchy about Hiccup right now. We'll get him to the boat. Please, just go."

They left, and she turned back to the Night Fury. "Toothless, we're taking him to the boat. Home. Do you understand home? You go too, Toothless. You can stay with Hiccup." She talked to Toothless in a calm voice. At the same time, she waved Snotlout over, and they placed the litter next to Hiccup.

The dragon watched warily as they slid Hiccup over to the litter. Snotlout and Astrid picked it up slowly. Berta shouldered the satchel, and walked up to the dragon. As the two teens walked towards the beach carrying Hiccup, Toothless slowly shuffled behind, his eyes not leaving his friend.

As they got near the boat, they saw Stoick talking with Gobber. Gobber was pointing his hook towards the boat. "Go ahead, Stoick. There's not much to do here. I know ye want to go with yer boy. We'll fish, and eat, and sleep. It'll be like a couple days off, it will."

Stoick finally put a hand on Gobber's shoulder. "Okay, my friend. But make sure everyone gets back. And easy on the mead." He had seen supplies offloaded, and noted that someone had even brought a few small casks of drink. You can always trust a Viking to keep their

priorities straight. "If there's any more wounded left, get them on the next boats. They need to be back before any storms come up." There were only a few lightly wounded. Mostly, some burns and a few cuts. Stoick thought of what it could have been.

They had run the fishing boat, Berk's largest, right up on the beach. Hands reached over the side to grab one end of the litter as Astrid, Snotlout, and now Stoick raised it up over the railing. Stoick watched as the dragon climbed over the side to follow Hiccup. He shook his head, and climbed up after the rest. Snotlout jumped back down, since he was using a dragon for transport. He shouted back; "Do I need to lead you out?"

Good question. Stoick turned to the Night Fury. "Can you lead us home, boy?" He pointed to the figure lying on the deck, then towards the sea. "Understand me? Hiccup. Home. Village." Toothless looked at Stoick, then Hiccup. He slowly walked to the bow. Stoick waved Snotlout off.

A group of men shoved the boat off the beach. It started making its way home.

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Snotlout walked over to his dragon. During the trip, he had come up with the name Hookfang. It sounded intimidating, just like him. He patted the dragon's side, and scratched the long snout. The Nightmare had been around many long years, but had no dealing with humans before this, except in the training arena. They were still getting used to each other, but the Nightmare could pick up strange things from this person.

Snotlout sighed. He looked at the dragon. "What do I do, Hookfang? This stupid feeling junk is for other people, not me." Hiccup had given him a dragon, and all the freedom of the sky. But guilt hung over him like Astrid's axe, and he didn't deal well with that stuff at all. He went off to get Hookfang some fish. As soon as the next boats were loaded, they were leading them back.

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Loki walked down the large hallway towards his chambers. He was a worried God. At the moment, he wasn't worried about the Viking boy, or the shield-maiden he had divulged secrets to. No, this was someone else. He had always been able to protect himself, and not having any close ties over the many centuries of his life made it easier. He, and he alone, bore the cost of his actions.

But nowâ€¦ there was someone. And worse, someone within Freya's power. Someone who could be hurt because of him. Someone who could be given over to Helheim. For a century, he had kept the secret. It wasn't so hard, since Freya was so sure of herself. Entice a few shield-maidens, corrupt the occasional Valkyrieâ€¦ it was easy to throw her off the scent. For the first time, Loki had to think about someone else.

It was because of the boy. He must live, for now. He was playing for time now. If Freya hadn't believed him, she would have taken more direct action. At least he has protected the boy a while longer.

Perhaps long enough to get the proof he needed to convince Odin to do something. If necessary, the young blond shield-maiden could be sacrificed. She was a weapon, or a shield he intended to use to defend the young man. Shields can break, but often they fulfill their purpose. Yes, he can help her, providing it doesn't give him away.

He doesn't possess the gift of foresight that Odin does, since his own visions are ever-changing. His actions alter the future more quickly than Odin's long-term ideas. He told the girl she only need worry about _mortal_ problems, but even then, something will soon get out of hand.

Can he risk drawing attention to the one single person he wanted to hide?

He walked into his chambers. "Ah! You waited up for me."

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After guiding the boat through the rocks, Toothless lay beside Hiccup. His tail wrapped around Hiccup, cradling him from any movement of the boat. Berta had spoken to a few men, and they had caught some fish. Not only Toothless, but Astrid's dragon, Stormfly, was present. Stoick hadn't questioned Astrid's right to go with Hiccup. Her dragon had had a strenuous day previously. Astrid loitered near Hiccup, while the Nadder perched on the stern.

A man came up to Astrid with a bucket. "These are forâ€¦ theâ€¦ you know." As brave as they were, some people still were a bit frightened of dragons this close. Astrid took the bucket and walked to the stern. She tossed the fish up one at a time, while Stormfly snatched them out of the air. She looked over to Toothless. Berta was scratching his nose, while feeding him fish from another bucket.

Astrid looked towards Stoick. He was sitting quietly, watching his son. She wondered what he was thinking. Just a couple days ago, he had disowned Hiccup for befriending a dragon. Then dragons had saved everyone on that beach. His son had paid a price for that victory. Stoick should be happy for him. Hiccup had proven himself the warrior son that Stoick had always dreamed of yesterday. Then why was he so worried?

As Astrid watched, Stoick read, once again, a piece of parchment in his hand. Fishlegs had run up to him before they left, and handed it to him. Fishlegs had been happy, almost dancing, when he handed it over. It was obviously, to him at least, very good news. Yet Stoick had sat reading it again and again, with a deep frown on his face. Finally, he crumpled up the parchment and threw it over the side. It certainly didn't get the reaction Fishlegs had expected.

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Snotlout was getting ready to leave when the twins flew in. That meant the wave of smaller, slower boats had arrived. Snotlout was getting ready to lead the rest of the larger ones back to Berk. They had made much a dent in the people here. Stoick had called every man

and woman able to fight for this battle, and it was the majority of their whole island.

The Zippleback came in for a landing alongside Hookfang. The twins got off and walked over to him.

Ruffnut got there first. "Hey, 'lout. What's the word on Hiccup?"

Snotlout shrugged. "The healer says he'll live. He's still out of it, though. Didn't you pass them? They left just after dawn."

Ruffnut nodded. "Yeah, we saw his dragon on the boat. Didn't think he'd be far off."

Tuffnut walked up. Then Fishlegs came up from behind them. The four of them just sort of stood there, looking at each other. The battle, then the rush to get help here, hadn't left them much time to think about everything.

Tuffnut looked around. "So now that scrawny thing is a big hero, huh? Who'd of thought?"

Fishlegs looked thoughtful. "Heroes always get the girls, too. Bet he's married by spring."

Ruffnut snickered. "Oh, come on! Hiccup? He wouldn't know what to do with a girl! Besides, all he did wasâ€¦ kill a giant dragonâ€¦ after taming a Night Furyâ€¦ and saving the whole villageâ€¦" Her voice trailed off as she actually considered this.

Tuffnut looked at Snotlout. "I bet you're pissed. Everyone expected that Stoick was going to name you his heir. Now I bet he parades Hiccup around like a prize sheep."

Snotlout frowned. That part was true. For years, his father Spitelout had been grooming him to be a perfect Viking warrior. As Hiccup's only cousin and closest family, he was the next choice for the Chieftom. With all the screwing up and disasters that Hiccup had been involved in, many people figured that Stoick would have to name another heir.

Oddly, it didn't bother him today. He just shrugged, turned around, and walked off down the beach.

Ruffnut elbowed her brother in the ribsâ€¦ hard. "Oooo, what's eating him? Must have hit pretty close."

Tuffnut gasped for air, bent over clutching his side.

Then Ruffnut looked out over the sea. Hiccup? Well, think about it, girl. Look at your choices here. Fishlegs is okay, but not a lot of fun. Snotlout isâ€¦ well, kind of a mouthy pig. Tuff's fun, but he happens to be my brother. Then we have to think about older guys. Or twelve-year-olds. Hiccup's cute enough. Is he fun, though? Nobody ever found out. C'mon, he tamed dragons! What else don't I know? He could be my kind of crazy. Hero and Chiefâ€¦ could do worse thanâ€¦ _

Her thoughts were cut off by Tuffnut tackling her from behind.

But kicking his butt beat thinking any day.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Astrid sat near Hiccup and Toothless. The Night Fury slept some, feeling better now that he had wrapped himself around Hiccup. She watched Stoick pacing the length of the ship. It was pretty crowded, so he gave it up and sat back down near them. She had to ask.

"Chief?"; she asked. His head turned towards her. "Chief, when Fishlegs gave youâ€¦ whatever it was, he was sure it was good news. But you don't look like it was. Is it Hiccup?"

Stoick looked like he was chewing on a tough piece of mutton for a few seconds, then; "Not quite, lass. Fishlegs is one smart boy. He keeps track of everything. He's been keeping track of all we had on Berk." Stoick looked out over the side of the ship.

"According to him, we'll be fine this winter, and from now on. If the dragon raids really will stop, we'll have plenty of meat and fish for everyone. No rationing, even."

He looked at Astrid with a pained face. "Its been harder for the elders to keep it a secret, anyway. We've lost so many sheep and yaks over the past few years, that we can't replace them fast enough. The only thing that saved us was the fishing."

He leaned towards Astrid. "But the people knew, Astridâ€¦ they felt it. We only had dragon training every other year now. And your class was only six. The last one was ten." He placed his hands on his knees and sat up straighter. "And the next one, in two years, would only have been three. People quit having babies." He looked straight into her eyes. "Do you know what that means?"

Astrid thought about it. She couldn't remember seeing many children at all. No babies being carried through the market. "It meansâ€¦ thatâ€¦" She was afraid to look at Stoick.

"Aye."; he said. "Berk was dying. The people were giving up. They're a brave lot, but they're tired." He looked at his son lying there. "Hiccup did more than save us from the dragons. He saved the village itself."

Stoick looked at the deck in front of his feet. "That's why I should just give up the Chieftom as soon as he wakes up. My stubbornness almost destroyed Berk and almost cost me my son. They deserve someone better."

Astrid gasped. "No! You can't mean that! You're a great Chief. The best ever! It's not your fault."

Stoick looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "And how can it not be?" he said softly.

Astrid racked her brain for the right answer. "But there's no way we could have known this. It had to be someoneâ€¦" She froze. Oops. What? Smart? Caring? Crazy? Good? What word could she possibly say

that didn't make it sound worse for Stoick? "â€|really different."
She just couldn't say _why_ he was so different.

For the first time today, Astrid saw Stoick smile. "That he is, girl." Then his face fell again as he looked at Hiccup. "Even despite all I did to him his whole life, he still was loyal to his people. In _spite_ of me, heâ€|"

Astrid laid a hand on his arm. "No. You did your best to teach him to be a Viking. And he remembered the important stuff when it mattered the most." She looked at Hiccup. "We allâ€| all of usâ€| gave him a hard time for what he was. Now can't we just loâ€| love him for the same reasons?"

Stoick looked at her. She went on; "I hope he's the same Hiccup when he wakes up. Then, maybe we can make life better for him than it was. He _deserves_ that, doesn't he? He _was_ a _Viking_ all along."

Stoick was still a moment, then nodded. "Thank you, Astrid. It doesn't help what I've done, but I can change the future for him."

The old fisherman whose boat this was walked over to Stoick. "Chief, we'll be getting there just before dark, it looks like."

Stoick perked up just a bit. "Thanks. Good work. We've made great time."

The man shrugged. "Don't thank me. We haven't had to tack all day. The wind's blowing straight home." He looked up. "Strange, this time 'o year. Usually out of the East." He went back to the helm.

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Freya wasn't in a good mood. She paced her chambers. Her Valkyrie had returned that morning empty-handed. The boy still lived. _What was Loki up to?_

She turned to one of her maids. "Tell Thrud I need to see her immediately."

The woman nodded and left.

Freya was frustrated. Her window, for now, had closed. _Those damned laws again!_

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Loki settled on the large, round couch. "Ahhh. It's been a long night. Would you terribly mind getting me a drink?" he said to the dark-haired woman sitting there.

She gave him a sly look, and went to the small serving table. "Huumph. I'll _bet_. Spending the night fooling around with that little blond." She poured a large goblet of wine. "Did you use the '_rich traveling merchant_' act on her, too? Did she go weak in the knees when you _smiled_ at her?" She poured herself a goblet of mead. "How long before you had _her_ on her back, _hmmmm?_"

She turned to face him, a goblet in each hand. She was tall, with raven hair. Part of her hair was down her shoulders, tied instead of braided, with a single black leather band. The rest, unfettered, fell down her back. Her face was almost elfin, with her large green eyes the most captivating feature. She wore a dark blue gown. It had once covered her ankles, but had been roughly cut at the knees, showing considerably more leg than was proper.

Loki also knew that strapped to each thigh was a thin leather sheath. And that one of them was currently empty.

What was it like to love a woman whose heart you had to win _every single day_? He knew. She had been in Valhalla many years before seeing Loki. When she had discovered who he really was, she spent the next months trying to find out if you _could_ kill a God. They then spent the next hundred years making up, or at least, her idea of it.

She walked towards him, smiling. She handed him his goblet, and sprawled beside him.

Loki smiled. "Oh, you aren't _jealous_, are you? You know I like them a bit moreâ€¦| _frisky_ than that."

Thessa emptied her goblet and threw it off to the side. She sat up, and ran her fingers around a lock of Loki's hair. "Dearestâ€¦|" she said; "You'll know when I'm really jealous, because you'll be talking in a much higher voice."

Loki sat his goblet down beside the couch. He reached up and grabbed her wrist. Then the other one. He forced her back on the couch and kissed her.

For a while, her mouth betrayed her. Then she tried to bite his tongue off. Loki pulled his head back and smiled.

"_Beast_!" She spat the words out at him. "_Ravisher_!" She struggled against his weight on her.

Loki let go of her wrists. He sat up, and turned his back to her. "_Fine_. Go where you want."

She sprang up, grabbing the shoulders of his coat, and buried her teeth in his neck. He reached up and pulled her around in front of him. His arms were wrapped around her back, trapping her arms by her sides. He kissed her neck.

She became still. "Beast." She said again, but this time her voice was a whisper. "I grow soft and weak here with you. You've ruined me."

Loki reached up and cupped her cheek, rubbing a thumb under her eye. "No, dearest one. You've only gotten stronger." He waved a hand, and the lamps dimmed.

The rest of the night, she only fought him enough to prove she loved him.

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Just coming over the horizon, they could see the fires of Berk's beacons in the falling darkness. Vikings moved carefully through the crowded boat, taking in sail, and maneuvering for the docks through the surrounding stacks. Stoick stood by the bow. Toothless noticed what was going on, and he hovered over Hiccup, Almost covering Hiccup with his body, looking around. Astrid stepped over and patted his neck.

The water was smooth and still as the boat slid into a slip with barely a bump. Several Vikings threw lines overboard to the men and women on the dock waiting. Once secure, the mass of Vikings jumped over the side, grateful for some room to stretch and less smelly air.

Stoick saw Aarnold and his men running to where the new boats were built. He promised that the two longboats would sail at first light. He turned to another about to leave. "Go to Gothi's house. Tell her Hiccup is at our home." He grabbed another couple of men in passing. "Go to my house. Get Hiccup's bed from his room upstairs and move it down by the fire."

As the deck cleared quickly, Stoick walked back to the little group by the side. Astrid had gently shoved Toothless back so they could carry Hiccup home. She stood by one end of the litter as Stoick walked up. Berta had shouldered her bag, and stood by them. Together, they carried Hiccup from the boat. It was easier than on the beach, and they were able to gently get to the dock.

There were people lining the pathway to the Chief's house. The ones who had heard Astrid yesterday, and gotten updates from the other teens were all waiting for news of the Chief's son. They quietly watched the odd little procession climb the hill. Many gazed in wonder at the Night Fury, trailing behind Berta, and watching everyone with huge green eyes. Most of them were muttering prayers to whichever God they thought would listen, asking for help for the young man who had given them back their loved ones alive and whole.

They got him up the stairs, and someone held the door open for them. Stoick and Astrid put down the litter by the bed. Carefully, Stoick at Hiccup's shoulders, they picked him up to put him on the bed. Astrid picked up his legs or leg. She froze a moment, and then slid an arm up to catch the end of his left leg where it ended. She was shaking as they settled him on the bed. Another man had lit a fire, and was putting wood on it. The light was getting better as Stoick grabbed one of the thick blankets. He turned to Astrid. "Go home, lass. Get some sleep. We'll make sure he's comfortable. Come back tomorrow." Knowing a dismissal when she heard that tone of voice, she reluctantly headed for the door. She saw Berta putting down her bag.

Going towards her house, she was bumped from behind by Stormfly. She stood there a minute, idly scratching the Nadder under her chin. What do I do now?, she wondered. What do they want? And another thought came to her. What do I want? What were her feelings for him now?

She sighed. Looking at Stormfly, she muttered; "I thought everything was so easy to figure out a couple days ago."

Beckoning the dragon to follow, he went home. It was going to be fun explaining to her parents about the Nadder that was going to be sleeping in her room tonight.

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Frigg smiled as she looked into the scrying pool. _That devil!_ Loki had protected himself and his chambers with every possible magic to keep his secrets. Only by using Odin's power, loaned freely to her, was Frigg finally able to see what he had hidden for so long. _Oh, this was rich!_ She didn't think he had it in him.

Frigg stood there, chewing on her fingertip, thinking. _Why couldn't he have told me?_ Then it fit together. Freya owns the souls of the Hall of Heroes. This woman was a dead mortal. Loki plots against Freya.

He fears for her! Frigg was simply _not_ going to put up with that. He simply _must_ bring her around for a feast.

As she left the pool, she was humming to herself. _I had never seen a woman bend that way._ She hoped her husband wasn't too tired tonight.

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Gothi had examined Hiccup. The leg looked like it was healing well. There was no fever. The fear of further infection was past. She patted Berta's arm, as the young woman knelt beside the bed. She nodded, letting the girl know she had done well. She smiled up at Stoick, nodded, and grasping her walking stick, left for her hut.

Berta stood up and faced Stoick. "You get some sleep, too, Chief. I napped on the boat. I'll be fine. Gothi doesn't think there's anything to worry about now."

Stoick nodded. "Thank you. But I've got to get to the Great Hall. There's a lot of questions being asked." He sighed. "And I don't have all the answers." He gestured to his sleeping son. "I need him, Berta. I know, it sounds strange even to me, but I need him."

Leaving the house, his eyes passed over Toothless, curled by the fire and watching Hiccup. The Night Fury had simply walked in and lay down out of the way. Even Stoick didn't think it wise to deny the beast. He owed the dragon for his son's life. He would never come between them again.

As he left for the Great hall, he thought something else; I've always needed him. I just didn't know it. Valka, what have I done?

—

6. Ideas

****Ideas.****

The following week passed in a blur to the young dragon riders. After

a few trips, the smaller fishing boats went to their regular job. Winter was coming, and the regular extra gathering had been halted for looking for the nest. The two longboats made a big difference in getting everyone back.

Every group of ships went out with a dragon on the bow of the lead boat. The teens got some sleep on the boats, or a short break back at Berk. Astrid, and the others so a lesser extent, spent time at the Chief's house, watching over Hiccup.

Berta spent most of the day there. She would clean Hiccup, and get a few sips of broth in him, and use ointments on his burns, particularly his face, so they wouldn't leave scars.

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That was the situation on this morning, when Astrid walked in. Berta was smearing something on Hiccup's forehead and chin, and singing a pleasant song to him. Astrid didn't really feel that happy songs were appropriate.

"What's with the singing? He can't hear anything." She said. She had been on short sleep lately, and wasn't in a very good mood. Hiccup's continued sleep didn't help any.

Berta looked up at her. "Well, good morning to you, too." She wiped her hands on a cloth. "I don't really know what he can or can't feel like this." she explained. "Elders say that when people fall in such a deep sleep, their spirits are wandering. That they're looking for something." Then her face got rather grim. "Some never come back." She brushed his hair. "I thought singing might help him realize he has something to come back to."

Astrid considered this with a frown. She was the only one who knew why he was healing physically so quickly. Did the potion take care of that, too?

Berta stood up, stretching her back. "Can you watch him for a while? I need to get something to eat, and freshen up a bit."

Astrid nodded. Berta walked to the door. Turning to the Night Fury, she bent over and patted her thighs. "Toothless, let's go get some food. Come on, now, that's a good dragon." She spoke softly, as Toothless unwound from a column and followed her out the door, taking one last look at Hiccup.

Astrid stood her axe by the door as she saw the two of them walk towards the main village. Then she walked over and sat on the stool beside the bed. She leaned over and kissed his forehead. "You'd better come back." she warned. She played with a lock of his hair. "You've started all this new stuff. What do we do now? We need you." She leaned over farther, kissed his cheek, and whispered "I need you."

She sat there and figured she'd better get herself sorted out. What had she gotten into? And more important; what did she want to get into?

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Stoick was in the great hall, at the head table. Spitelout and several others were there also. They were discussing what needed to be done before winter sets in. Once the cold starts, everyone will be settled in their homes for the duration. Only watch patrols and important business will be going on until the ice breaks.

While the men were listening, Fishlegs was going over a few ideas. "We haven't seen but a few, but there's bound to be roving dragons coming around now that they're free." He handed over some drawings he had made. Not as intricate as Hiccup would have done, but he was doing his best. "We put some urns of fish around the village borders, and they shouldn't do anything dangerous. Seems dragons really like fish instead of sheep. As far as our own dragons, a big urn in the town center and maybe one at the arena will keep them happy."

Stoick looked at the drawings, and handed them to Spitelout. "Can you get some people on this today? And check on the fishing boats." Stoick was a bit haggard looking. More than most others, the waiting was having an effect on his mood.

Fishlegs added; "The good thing is that even if we feed every dragon that shows up, it's only a tiny amount next to what they've been stealing."

Fishlegs left with Spitelout. Stoick took a single bite from the plate of food that had been mostly untouched all morning. He knew there was a lot to do, and starving himself wouldn't help anything.

A shadow fell across the table. Stoick looked up. "What can I do for you, Phlegma?" he asked the shield-maiden.

Was she blushing a bit? Phlegma handed Stoick a parchment. "I know he'll be fine, Stoick. I just want you to think about this." She turned and walked away.

Stoick read the parchment and sighed. _Another one already_. He had several stacks of parchments in front of him. One was labeled '_Dragons_'. Another one was '_Defense Changes_'. There was one for '_Village Business_'. But a new one, and the fastest growing, was the one that said '_Marriage Contracts_'. Phlegma had just offered her eldest girl for consideration.

He couldn't help the surge of pride he felt. He had been trying to arrange a marriage since Hiccup was eight. Now everyone knew that aside from being a bit strange, he was brave, and a true Viking. His ideas weren't so crazy anymore. And with that came respect. The kind of respect that Vikings only give a tried warrior. Gifts and food had shown up at the Chief's house constantly these past days. The men were grateful to be alive. The women were happy to have their men back. The old ones were happy for their children. Everyone would be happy without dragon raids. And _Hiccup_ was responsible for it all. Suddenly he wasn't the boy that nobody wanted their daughter to talk to anymore.

Stoick tapped the table, and thought that maybe they had better let things settle down some. Maybe some would change their minds. Because as it was, Hiccup was going to be in one fine mess when he got better.

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Sometime later, Berta had returned. Astrid wandered over towards the Main Hall for some food. Even with her Nadder plodding behind her, people were greeting her and wishing her well. All of the dragon riders were well thought of.

Going in, she got a bowl of yak stew, which was almost constantly simmering there. She walked over to where Tuffnut was easting, and sat across from him.

Tuffnut was stuffing his face like food had been outlawed. Must have been a rough night. He emptied his plate while Astrid took small spoonfuls. Finally he sat back, and seemed to see her at last.

"Hey, Astrid. What's up?"

She shrugged. "Just trying to get everything back to normal."

Tuffnut, frowned, and leaned over the table. "Yeah, well I don't think it's gonna be normal around here for a while." He looked into her face. "Ruff went out in a dress!"

Astrid paused. "Any particular reason?" She had her suspicions.

Tuffnut raised an eyebrow. "Really? There's only one reason that every girl gets dolled up like it's a Thawfest party."

Astrid slowly nodded. "Yeah, I thought that."

Tuffnut tapped the table. "And I'm not so sure Ruff should marry Hiccup, anyway."-

Astrid's spoon stopped halfway to her mouth. "Why not?"

Tuffnut threw his hands in the air. "There's hardly enough room in that bed for the two of us as it is! If she marries Hiccup, I'm never gonna get any sleep!"

clank Astrid's spoon hit the bowl. Her hand remained frozen in that position in mid-air. Her mouth dropped open. I really did not need to know that!

Tuffnut continued. "And they'd better get all that kissing stuff done before bed, 'cause I'm not putting up with that all night."

Astrid noticed the widening circle of silence growing around them as others caught the thread of the conversation.

Astrid was sure she was turning a bit pink. "Ummm, Tuffnut! I don't think that's how it would work. It'll be different if Ruff gets married."

Tuffnut frowned, then smiled. "I get it! We'd move over to the Chief's house! I'll bet Hiccup's bed's a lot bigger!"

Astrid shook her head. "No, that's not what I mean." She leaned over

and lowered her voice. "Didn't your parents ever give you the '_talk'_? You _know_? The talk about _boys_ and _girls_ and _stuff_? Stuff they would do _alone_?"

Tuffnut thought. "Well, when Ruff started getting boobs, mom chased us out of the house. They were in there, like forever talking about something."

Astrid nodded. "And?"

Tuffnut winced. "Then she came outside and puked over the side of the porch. She was retching for five minutes! Then she called men '_a bunch of disgusting, vile pigs_', and kicked me right in the..."

"_Gloormmmphh_!" The strange sound came from down the table. Hobarth the Mournful, so named for not having smiled in thirty years, clambered out of his seat and ran for the door. His face was red, tears were streaming from his eyes, and he had a hand pressed over his mouth.

As the door slammed behind him, Tuffnut asked "Wow. What's up with him?"

Astrid picked up her spoon. "Bad mutton, I'd guess." She pointed her spoon at Tuffnut. "Didn't your dad have one of those talks with you, too?"

"Well, no, I don't think." Tuffnut thought. "I know mom reminds him. There must be some physical thing to it, though. 'Cause every time mom says something, he says he doesn't have the strength."

Several other Vikings left hurriedly. Someone at the next table had their head buried in their arm, mug banging on the table.

Tuffnut looked around. "Man, that must really be some bad mutton. Glad I had the fish."

Astrid tried another way. "Look, Tuff. You have a lot of sheep, right?"

Tuffnut sat back proudly. "Yep. One of the biggest herds on Berk."

"Okay." Astrid continued. "And every spring you turn them loose in the pasture." Tuffnut nodded.

"Then, you let the ram out. What happens then?" Astrid waved her hand in a circular motion. "_Get it now_"

Tuffnut screwed his face up, and stared at her wide-eyed. "_Astrid! That's _disgusting! Just _what_ do you _do_ at night?"

Astrid, shook her head. "No, that's perfectly natural"

Tuffnut broke in. "You're _sick! I would _never_ do _that_ with a sheep!" Then he sat there a minute. "Wait. You mean if I get her a ram for a Snoggletog present, she won't want to marry Hiccup?"

Astrid threw her hands in the air. "_No_! _That's not it_! _I give up_!" She stood up to leave. "Look. Maybe you should ask your _mother_ about this. And _don't_ mention _my_ name at all, if you don't want another kick in theâ€¦"

"Okayâ€¦ _okay_." Tuffnut put up his hands.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Freya was pacing in front of the patio when Thrud walked in. Thrud stood at attention, her spear making a _thunk_ on the marbled floor. Her red corset was a wide splash of color against her white tunic.

Freya walked over to her. "What happened down there? You and Kara were supposed to come back with someone."

Thrud shrugged. "I don't know. We were there. He _was_ dying." Thrud looked into Freya's eyes. "Thenâ€¦ there was some sort of mist or something. We couldn't see or hear anything. The strange part is the _horses_ wouldn't go any closer. Kara tried, believe me."

Since it was _Kara_, Freya _did_ believe her. Kara was her most trusted Valkyrie. She was zealous in carrying out any instruction Freya gave. Even her name meant _devastate_. And Thrud herself came from a famous warrior lineage.

No, nothing _mortal_ could have prevented them from carrying out that mission. One stupid mortal boy couldn't have done this. And that meantâ€¦

She waved towards the door, dismissing Thrud. _Loki!_ She was beginning to suspect that his goal here was different than what he led her to believe. And he would pay for that. She didn't like the risk, but she may have to get moreâ€¦ _personally_ involved here.

As Thrud left, Freya didn't catch the smile starting on the young Valkyrie's face. _Oh, mom's going to love this!_

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So, Astrid wasn't in a good mood later as she walked towards her house. She looked over, and saw Ruffnut coming out of the Chief's house. She stopped dead to look at her friend. Ruffnut was wearing a pale yellow dress. It fit her perfectly, if a bit snug, and was topped off with a gold belt and necklace. Darned if she didn't look like a _girl_.

Astrid was still staring when Ruffnut stopped in front of her. Ruffnut put her hands on her hips and smiled at Astrid.

"Hi." Was all Ruffnut said.

Astrid gestured down Ruffnut's body. "And what's _this_ all for, as if I didn't know?" She tried to control her temper.

Ruffnut smiled. With big eyes, she grabbed her dress and twirled around in front of Astrid. "You like?"

Astrid shrugged. "It's a dress. You're a girl. What's the big deal?"

Ruffnut smiled again. "You should try it. Being a _girl_, I mean."

Astrid felt like growling. "What's that supposed to mean? You didn't care _anything_ about boys! What's different now? All we used to talk about was how _stupid_ they were." She gestured again. "Now you're prancing around inâ€¦ _that_. And I bet you're hoping Hiccup wakes up and sees you first thing."

Ruffnut explained. "_Look_, Astrid. We're going to be married off soon anyway. If you don't want an old man or a kid, we don't have a lot of choices. And you can't deny Hiccup _is_ cute." She waved her arm around in a circle. "Half the unmarried women in the village would marry him tomorrow, and the rest are thinking about it."

Ruffnut got a mean grin on her face. "And the _only_ girls he really knows at all are you and me. And _I'm_ the only one that can make him a good wife."

Astrid sputtered. "Oh, aren't we just _full_ of ourselves! What makes you the Gods' gift to man all of a sudden?"

Ruffnut wasn't impressed. "_Humph_. There's a list, I'll have you know. I can fight. I can sew. I can take care of a household. I know livestock. I can fish." She smiled sweetly. "And my mom is the best cook in Berk. And I learned everything! She always said the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. And _everybody_ knows your cooking _stinks_."

Astrid sneered. "_Yeah_? Well, as tight as that dress is, I'll bet you go a bit lower down than the _stomach_!"

Ruffnut laughed. That shot didn't have the impact Astrid was trying for. "Oh, you're just as stuck up and closed minded about _that_ as everything else!" She put a hand on her hip and cocked it out. "I'll give Stoick healthy grandkids, and I'll make sure he knows that. He'd die of old age waiting for _you_ to touch a man."

"Uhhh, excuse me." A voice broke in. Fishlegs stood off to one side. He was holding a book in his hands, and decidedly uncomfortable.

"_WHAT!_" Both girls said together, snapping their heads around. The book slipped from Fishlegs' hands as he jumped. If the combined double glare had carried half the hate they felt, he would have dissolved into a puddle of chicken fat right there.

Fishlegs cleared his throat. "Ahemâ€¦ well, as fascinating as this conversation isâ€¦ I mean, wondering which body part leadsâ€¦ ummmâ€¦ where and allâ€¦ you both forget something."

Two sets of female eyebrows went up. Astrid prompted through clenched teeth; "_What_? Forgot _what_, exactly?"

Fishlegs not-quite looked straight in their eyes. "We're talking

about _Hiccup_ here. And we all know he's _different_." He looked down at his feet. "I think in this case, the way to Hiccup's heart is through his _dragon_."

He looked up towards the Chief's house. "And I'm not the only one. _She's_ the only one Toothless listens to now."

They all looked up the hill. Berta was throwing fish high into the air, and Toothless was leaping up to catch them. After the last fish, Berta scratched him on the nose, and Toothless followed her back inside.

Astrid and Ruffnut frowned at each other.
Damn.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Frigg walked into Loki's main chamber. It was the usual mess. She walked towards the back hallway, carrying a silver bundle.

"Loki!" she called. "Loki, dear! At least come say hello!"

Loki walked slowly from the hallway. He was wearing a dark green robe that brushed the floor. He was tightening a black belt around his waist.

"Mother!" His smile looked a bit forced. "What brings you here this early?" He waved towards a couch. "Can I get you some tea?"

Frigg shook her head. "Not now, dear. I'm just here to invite you two for a little get-together I'm having tomorrow."

Loki froze. He wasn't even sure if he was still breathing. "Ummm, _two_? There's justâ€¦"

Frigg laughed. "Oh, come on, Loki! You know I can always tell when you're hiding something. When you and Thor were children, you couldn't look me in the eye half the time. And you're doing it now."

Loki sighed. "I'm just not sureâ€¦ anyoneâ€¦ should know."

Frigg walked up and kissed him on the cheek. "I know. That's so sweet. Quite unlike you, I admit, but really sweet."

She faced the hallway. "Come on out, girl! I won't bite. Promise."

Thessa slowly edged out the side of the hallway. She was wearing another of Loki's robes. On her, it dragged on the floor behind her like a gown. Her face was still, her eyes wide. Loki had impressed upon her the importance of secrecy.

Frigg put the bundle down on a table and walked over to her. She grabbed Thessa's handsâ€¦ or at least the ends of the sleeves that completely covered them, and kissed her on the cheek.

"Well, hello, there. I'm sorry it took so long for us to meet." She glanced back at Loki. "It seems someone was being very selfish, keeping you all to them self." She bent down to look Thessa in the

eyes.

"Anyway, we've having a little group feast tomorrow. Just family, you see. And Loki never brings anyone! It's been so long since I had anyone new to talk to."

Frigg narrowed her eyes. "And you're going to be there, aren't you?"

Thessa, eyes as big as plates, slowly nodded.

Frigg straightened up and walked over to the table. "Good. Now, I brought you a few things I thought you'd like." She looked over towards Loki again. "It's formal, you. No slouchy things again." She picked up the silver bundle.

She beckoned to Thessa. "Come over here. I didn't know if I should match your eyes or your hair. They're both so lovely."

She shook her hands, and held up a silver gown, made of a strange, shimmering material. "The waist is okay, but it may be a bitâ€ tightâ€ elsewhere." She lowered her arms a bit to look at Thessa. "But I've never seen men complain about that." She winked as she laid the gown across Thessa's outstretched arms. She turned back to the table. "These slippers should be fine, and, ohâ€ I brought some jeweled combs for that gorgeous hair." She held up a pair of combs that seemed to reflect and bounce the smallest light into a rainbow of almost blinding color.

She looked sternly at Loki. "Can you get her at least the most basic woman things? Brushesâ€ fragrance? Can I trust you can do at least that?"

Loki nodded.

Frigg came over and kissed him on the cheek again. "Good boy. Now listen. The party starts at the eighth hour. I want you two to make your usual flashy entrance at exactly the ninth hour." She smiled at him. "You know, fashionably late and all that. Thor just got back from another campaign in the realms, and you never care for the boring part anyway."

She turned towards the door. "Well, lot's to do. Don't be late! If I send your father to get you, he won't be happy!"

As Frigg left, Thessa slid over and grabbed Loki's arm. He reached up and laid a hand on it.

"So, that's your mother." Thessa said. "Strange woman. Nice, though." She looked up into Loki's face, anxious for some sign of what all this meant.

"Yes." Loki stated. "That pretty much describes her exactly." He sighed. "But I wonder what she's up to."

Thessa frowned. "You said I had to be quiet. That I could beâ€ sent away." Her grip on his arm tightened.

Loki leaned over and lightly kissed her temple. "Darling, if it were anyone else I would be worried. But motherâ€ well, she'sâ€

mother. If _she_ asked me to jump off a cliff, I would close my eyes and jump. Because it would only be for my own good."

Thessa looked at him. "To trust someone that much is frightening. But I know how you feel. What do I do?"

Loki smiled. "Well, I _guess_ we go to a feast, then. I've been wanting to show you off. With that gown, you could catch the eye of Odin himself." He turned her to face him, and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. "Besidesâ€¦ I've never been ashamed of you. I've been ashamed of _myself_ for hiding you. It hasn't been much of a life for you here, has it? The '_glorious Valhalla'_ , where you have to hide and skulk about at night. Whatever mother is doing, it won't be to hurt us, believe me."

She smiled back at him. "Watch it, or you'll start sounding like someone who cares."

Loki held her, his cheek resting on top of her head. _What _are_ you doing, mother? If Freya tries to take her, I'll fight. I won't give her up, even if it takes Ragnarok to hold her._

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Astrid and Ruffnut sat at a table in the Great Hall. There was an axe and a spear stuck in the table beside them, a silent warning to anyone who would dare approach. Neither one drank much mead, but tonight they were sitting across from each other, both staring at a mug in front of them.

"She's a _cow_!"

"She's _way_ too old for him! What, she's, like, _nineteen_?"

"She's taller than him."

"Well, who _isn't_?"

"Her boobs are too big."

"Yeah. What guy would want _those_ stuck in his face all the time?"

They looked at each other and frowned.

"We're just kidding ourselves, aren't we?"

"Pretty much. She's gorgeous."

"And she sings."

"And she's a healer. He'd need one, wouldn't he? This _is_ Hiccup."

Astrid banged her fist on the table. "But I know her! She _doesn't_â€¦ lâ€¦ love him."

Ruffnut raised an eyebrow. "Well, who _does_? Nobody knows him that well." She raised the other eyebrow. "Or _do_ they? You're taking

this pretty _personal_, aren't you?"

Then Ruffnut leaned across the table and lowered her voice. "But I've been _thinking_."

Astrid leaned in. _This was dangerous_.

Ruffnut looked around to make sure they were alone. "You see him with those dragons during training? And when he was teaching us?"

Astrid nodded, eyes narrowed.

Ruffnut smiled. "I wonder what he'd be like with a _woman_."

Astrid's eyes got wider.

Ruffnut's face got a bit flushed. "I wonder if he'd like to explore everything looking forâ€¦| _weaknesses_."

Astrid felt her face burning, too.

Ruffnut closed her eyes. "That secret power he uses to _control_. To bend someone to his will."

Ruffnut's eyes were a bit glazed when she opened them. "I wonder if he'd like to look for a spot to make _me_ purr like that."

Ruffnut seemed to go somewhere else. She was breathing rather heavy. Astrid reached across and slapped her, maybe just a _bit_ harder than she intended. "Snap out of it!"

Ruffnut seemed to wake up and shook her head to clear it. They both had a long pull from their mugs. It sure was warm in there tonight.

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Stoick walked into his house at the end of a busy day. He stopped. Berta's light, clear voice came from near Hiccup's bed, singing an old song about young lovers. He quietly walked into the room. The young healer was sitting in a chair by the fire. She was sewing a tunic together for Hiccup.

He had not heard such in this house since Valka. He closed his eyes and could picture the exact same scene. Hiccup was just a babe in a basket then, kept warm by the fire, while Valka mended clothes and sang. Some days, it was the only thing that kept the young Chief sane.

After Valka had been taken by dragons, somehow he had lost the feeling. He had denied his only son the care that the young wife and mother had given to everyone so freely. There was no apology worthy. He could only try to build the future. Hiccup's vision of peace.

A floorboard creaked. The song cut off as Berta looked around.

"Good even, Chief."

"I did not mean to startle you, girl. We've not had a woman's voice

like that for some time here."

Berta stood up. "I want you to know, Stoick, the boy's showing signs." She went over and sat on the edge of the bed. "He's been twitching someâ€¦ moving around a bit. I've talked to Gothi, and she thinks he may be starting to come around."

Stoick nodded. "Thank you, lass. Go home and get some rest now. I'll watch."

Berta grabbed up her wool shawl and threw it about her shoulders. On her way out, she scratched the dragon behind the ear. Toothless gave a low warble.

Stoick cleared his throat as she opened the door. "Ahemâ€¦ Bertaâ€¦ You've broughtâ€¦ some life back to this house. It's been a hard time, but I thank you." Stoick was avoiding looking directly in her eyes. He seemed to be wanting to say something else.

Berta shut the door again. "You're quite welcome, Stoick. But that's part of myâ€¦"

Stoick raised his hand. "I don't mean just that." He scratched his beard. "The beast likes you. You're a fine girl. Maybeâ€¦ you couldâ€¦ stay more."

Berta clapped a hand to her face. "_Chief_! Are you _proposing_?"

Stoick raised both hands as if to fend her off. "_No_! No." He lowered his hands. "At least not for _meself_, anyway."

Berta looked towards Hiccup. "He's a fine young man. But don't you complain that there's so many wanting to marry him already?"

Stoick looked at his feet. "Berta, I know you. I know yourâ€¦ history. You need to heal, too. Hiccup's a gentle boy." Stoick looked up and sighed. "_Too_ gentle, I thought for most of his life. I think he needs a special kind of wife. You don't need to answer now."

Berta gave the slightest of smiles as she opened the door. "Iâ€¦ I'll think about it, Stoick. Thank you for thinking me worthy."

The door closed behind her as Stoick sat in the big chair by the fire.

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7. Strange Days

****Strange days.****

Early the next morning, just with the dawn, Stoick was at the head table in the Great Hall. He was sorting through the newest notes and questions piled there. The last boats had arrived last night. Everyone was home, and that took a load off his mind. There wasn't a lot of real business, anyway. Gathering for winter was well under way. Everybody knew what to do. There was a watch for dragon raids,

but the occasional stray was all that had shown up.

A Nightmare had landed in the town square, had a few fish from the new large urn, looked around, and flown off again. The people simply were still and quiet for a moment. Hiccup and the other teens were proving to be right. The beasts were not hostile when left alone.

People were also getting used to the young riders flying about the village, or walking around trailed by their dragons. Children wanted to pet them. People threw them fish. One of the warriors from the battle on Dragon Island bowed to Hookfang, and blast if the thing hadn't bowed back.

Stoick thought how after centuries of dragon fighting, they were practically becoming citizens of Berk. There were a few holdouts, Mildew especially, but even he didn't have any real complaints.

Stoick was also thinking that they should somehow tell these things to other villages. They could still have troubles if they continued to attack any dragons that came near them.

This is what he was thinking when the coast watch bell rang. He left for the docks.

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Gobber had returned on the last longboat from Dragon Island. He had gone straight to the forge, carrying the wrecked controls for Toothless. There had been smoke, sparks, and hammering through the rest of the night once he found out that Hiccup still had not returned to the living.

He knocked gently on the door at the Chief's house just after dawn. Berta answered.

"Mornin', lass." He said. "I need to see Hiccup a moment." He went over to the boy's bed.

Berta watched as he uncovered Hiccup's stump, and began measuring his leg. Gobber scribbled numbers down on a piece of parchment. He already had the metal leg part finished, but he knew the leg attachment had to be just right.

Finishing, he stood up and looked down at his apprentice. "He looks like he's just sleepin'." He looked over towards Berta. "Is he gonna be all right? I mean, a week, isn't it?"

Berta nodded. "He's been healing well. He started moving around some. Gothi thinks he'll be fine."

Gobber took a last look. "Well, gotta get back ta work. I want this done when he wakes up, then." He left back for the forge.

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Sitting at a small table in her mother's chambers, Thrud was wolfing down a morning meal. In between bites, she was letting her mother

know what was going on in Freya's camp.

"Don't eat so fast, dear. It'll ruin your digestion."

Thrud swallowed, and had a gulp of tea. "Sorry, mom. I've got to get back on watch. Kara gets angry if she's left alone too long out there." She paused. "Is dad in any trouble about this? We're not supposed to play with the Midgardians so much, are we? I thought it was just '_do our job_' and all that."

Thrud's mother sighed. "It is getting a bit out of hand, dear. But Odin says this boy needs to live. Odin and your father disagree a lot, but he's loyal to the All-Father in the end."

Thrud was still confused. "But he'sâ€¦ Odin! Can't he just shut Freya up, or send her on a long vacation or something? Why all the sneaking around?" She sat up straight. "I'll bet you could kick her butt clear to Hel if you wanted!"

Thrud's mother laughed. "I wish it was that easy. She has to be caught breaking Odin's law first." She laid a hand on Thrud's arm. "Listen, you're young still. We're pretty hard to kill, but we're not completely immortal. You be careful out there. You can't _look_ like you're disobeying Freya." She smiled. "Besides, you know your father when he's angry."

Thrud nodded. She finished her tea, and stepped over and kissed her mother on the cheek. "Bye. Gotta fly."

Her mother watched her skip out the door. _So young for such a job_. For Aasgardians, spending a span as a Valkyrie was a learning experience. And she was proud of her daughter. Life here could be rather listless and dull for some. To volunteer for some of the less tasteful duties that had to be done was a mark of good character. But the dear girl was not even two thousand years old. She should still be wearing gowns and laughing at the boys trying to impress her, not pulling corpses from the battlefield. But who was _she_ to talk?

She finished her own meal as she figured out how she was going to handle her next step.

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Astrid had flown around the village on Stormfly. She hoped she never got over the thrill of the wind, and even the cold, as she watched the Earth move and tilt under her. The warmth of the dragon under her, the movement of muscles under the blue scalesâ€¦ it was a completely new life they had now.

It also seemed to free her mind from worldly problems. What to do about _Hiccup_, of course, was the thing that burned in her mind almost every waking second. And even in her sleep, it seems.

So she was supposed to watch him. No problem there. But if he _married_, that could be a bitâ€¦ awkward. _Unless_, of course, he married _her_. A month ago her only thought was dragon training. Now everything was a mess.

Like her argument with Ruff yesterday. Damn if the twin wasn't right, and that made it hurt even worse. Astrid's parents had never paid

much attention to the domestic qualities of their daughter. A family of warriors on both sides, they let her run and fight with the others, rather than teach her normal household tasks. She couldn't do a single thing that Ruff had bragged about. And that made Astrid even angrier.

Her dreams to this point had been glory from killing dragons, fighting Vandals and such, pushing back raidsâ€¦ everything a good shield-maiden wants to do. Being a _wife_ had never even entered her thoughts before.

And just how did _Hiccup_ feel about _her_? That wonderful ride, after a shaky start, on Toothless is what convinced her he was right. But did he feel anything _real_ for her, or was it just because she was going to tell Stoick? What if Ruffnut had followed him? Or any other girl?

Part of her wondered how he could like her at all. She was the leader of the group that hounded him for years. She could have put a stop to a lot of it, but she just didn't think it worth her time or effort.

She went back to the village. Flying was supposed to help her forget her problems, and now that didn't even work.

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Stoick and some others were at the docks when Johann's trader boat came to rest.

"Bit late in the year, isn't it?" Stoick asked.

Johann smiled. "Well, you know I keep moving until the water ices." He looked around. "I saw dragons flying around, Stoick. One of your fishing boats came alongside to tell me it was safe." He rubbed his beard. "Found it a bit hard to believe, that. Knowing your history with the creatures, that is. The man said the war is over with them."

Stoick nodded. "That it is, Johann. But why stand here talking on the dock? I'll put you up a few mugs and tell you all about it."

Johann clasped his hands together. "Now that sounds like my kind of story already!"

At the end of the dock, they were stopped by Gobber. "H'lo, Johannâ€¦ Stoick. I just need to make sure we get all the iron you carry this time, Johann."

"But of course, Gobber." Johann replied. "Coming with us to the Great Hall for a little refreshment?"

Gobber shook his head. "Sorry, not this time. Maybe later. I've got to finish Hiccup'sâ€¦ ummm" He looked towards Stoick. "Leg."

Johann started. "Leg? That boy?" He looked at Stoick. "_This_ sounds like a strange tale, indeed!"

Stoick led Johann off as Gobber ran back to the forge. "Stranger than

you could imagine. But tell me, where are you heading from here?"

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Astrid had gone by Hiccup's, to find nothing changed. Berta was still hovering around him like a mother hen. She went by the forge, but must have missed Gobber. Perhaps he had some insight to Hiccup. That man knew everything that went on anywhere, and Hiccup worked for him.

So she went to her old standby and stress reliever, axe practice. Her arm was already a bit stiff. The week had had too much going on for her to keep up with it. But even here, her mind didn't rest. When her axe just grazed a tree and flew off to one side, she figured she might as well call it a day.

She was getting her axe back when she saw Ruffnut sitting on a rock. "Oh. How long have you been there?"

Ruffnut shrugged. "Long enough to hear you cursing everything." She sat up straight. "Lookâ€¦ I just wanted to say I got carried away yesterday. You're the best friend I've ever had. I shouldn't have been so mean."

Astrid plopped down next to her. "Yeah, me too." She looked at the ground. "Especially when you're right about it."

Ruffnut's eyes went wide. "Really? You are weird lately. Have you seen Gothi yet?"

Astrid looked at her with narrowed eyes. "Don't push it. I just mean I never had to learn any of thatâ€¦ wifey stuff."

Ruffnut frowned. "I justâ€¦ wellâ€¦" She took a deep breath. "Look, Astrid. This is the first time in my life I ever had a chance to beat you at something. You're the only girl anywhere near my age, and I've spent my whole life being second place to you." She sighed. "I thought I had a chance at dragon training, and then Hiccup started doing his weird stuff. You're the only other one who ever made a point in there."

Ruffnut then sighed, with a gaze into the trees. "You've always been the prettiest, the fastest, the strongestâ€¦ the most anything. I thought this was my one chance to grab the prize from you."

She looked Astrid in the eyes. "Besides, I know it's a lost cause unless my family can buy him. Everybody knows he only looks at you."

"What?" Astrid looked at her. Then she thought about all the times over the years she caught him sneaking glances at her, and then looking away. "I thought that was just boy stuff, staring at my butt or something. He was just less obvious than Snotlout is about that."

Ruffnut smiled. "Wow, you don't really think about boys, do you?" She leaned over. "Look, there's a big difference between staring at any girl, and only staring at one girl." She poked Astrid's shoulder with a finger. "And you are his one girl." She looked

closely in Astrid's eyes. "But just what are you going to _do_ about it?"

"I don't know yet." Astrid felt frustrated. How deep did her feelings go? Hiccup now occupied her every waking moment, and most of her non-waking ones. And it would continue unless she made up her mind about him.

But maybe she should tell Ruffnut a few things. Maybe her best friend could help. "Uh, Ruff? Look. I need toâ€¦"

She started explaining, starting with her anger at him getting the best of her at dragon training. She talked about the night she met Toothless, and the ride with him. She talked about the talks Berta and she had on the beach at Dragon Island. She talked about her feelingsâ€¦ she talked about her need to protect him from dangers of the future. She blushed at her description of riding Toothless, holding her arms tight around Hiccup, head resting on his shoulder, feeling at peace with the world. She went on about how confident he was in the sky, about how the dragon and the boy had acted as a single being. And the way he stood up to her wanting to tell the Chief about the nest. His loyalty to Toothless. His bravery, and how he took command when they had to attack the Queen.

She finally finished, tired. She had only left out the part about her odd visitor at the beach. And she failed to mention the slim dagger she carried at her thigh.

Ruffnut took the whole thing in silence. Then she shook her head. "Okay, you win. You've got it _bad_. Let me get this straight. You get mad at him, stalk him, beat him up, and _you_ get a romantic dragon ride out of it. I _really_ need to change my strategy about boys."

Astrid shook her head slightly. "But he kidnapped me."

Ruffnut smiled. "On a _Night Fury_? Still romantic. Maybe better."

Astrid smiled a bit. "You forgot the part about almost getting eaten by a giant dragon."

Ruffnut sighed. "Yeah, he sure knows how to show a girl a good time, doesn't he?"

Ruffnut put her elbows on her knees, and rested her chin on her hands. "Your only problem now is all the other women that want him."

Astrid frowned. "Butâ€¦ you saidâ€¦"

Ruffnut looked up. "Yeah, but that's only if Hiccup has a _choice_. Of _course_, he'd pick _you_! But Stoick and Spitelout have been talkingâ€¦ sort of without knowingâ€¦ I was hiding near them. There's some _big_ dowry offers there. And they were talking about families joining, and possible alliances. You've got to get _Stoick_ on your side here. And that might take more than mom's yak pot pie."

Astrid sighed. "Can't I have a nice simple problem I can hit with an axe?"

Ruffnut frowned. "And if I help you, this just means I come in second place one more time, doesn't it?"

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Gobber was fitting Hiccup's new leg on as he lay still sleeping. He was frowning. "Lad don' have no meat on him to start with. We're gonna jus' have to let that sit a while. I padded everything I could. Leg looks good, though. Healin' better than mine did after jus' a week."

Berta looked at it sadly. "He didn't deserve this, Gobber. He's been through so much."

Gobber nodded as he adjusted a strap. "Aye, lass, he has that. We'll have to see how he takes it, though. Hiccup's always been a peculiar sort. This won't matter to any of us, though." He winked at Berta. "Shouldn't matter none to the ladies, either. 'Specially since he's still got all the good parts."

Berta had the decency to blush at that remark. "Has Stoick picked him out a bride, yet, Gobber? Any favorites of his?" She had been thinking about Stoick's comments the night before.

Gobber shook his head as he stood up. "Don' know, really. Been too busy to talk with him much. But I need to have a talk with him about it." He pointed a hand towards Hiccup. "This boy's done good. Saved us all. Before I'd go announcin' any betrothals, I'd find out what he wants, first. That's what I'd do."

He frowned. "But when Stoick come by the forge, he was talkin' all about 'good of the tribe', and 'best for Hiccup'. Right now I don't think he's on the right heading, if you get me."

Berta nodded as Gobber headed for the door. "Well, gotta get finished on that blasted harness thing for his dragon."

As Berta shut the door behind Gobber, she was thinking. There's still someone I need to talk to.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Johann, over a few mugs of ale, had been regaled with the story of Hiccup and the dragons. If not for the fact that the beasts were wandering through town, and young ones actually riding them, he would have written it off as drunken fantasy. It was harder to deny when Stoick pointed to the back wall. Someone had brought, and mounted, one of the Queen's teeth on wooden pegs. It was almost four feet long.

The only thing that was stranger was the joy and pride Stoick took in telling the tale. After the years of complaints about the boy, Stoick couldn't say three words without mentioning his son's part in all this. Other warriors had come and gone during this, often putting in a bit here and there. Someone should write this down. It was like the old epics.

When it looked like Stoick was finally winding down, he stood up. "I really must get the trading done, Stoick. I want to shove off at

first light tomorrow. But I'll take the letters you want if they're ready. This will likely be the last stop here 'til spring."

Stoick nodded as he left. He turned to a man who was leaving the hall. "Could you ask Fishlegs to see me here? And tell him to bring writing things."

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Thor walked into the small temple where Odin was peering into the scrying pool. "You asked for me, father?"

Odin looked at his son. Thor had turned out quite well, if you ask him. A bit hot-headed, but he fought for the people. He opposed cruelty and injustice, and he and his followers had the scars to prove their beliefs. Many will talk of such things, but Thor preferred to let Mjolnir, always by his side, do his talking for him.

Odin smiled. "Maybe I just wanted to see how you were getting along, son. You're gone from home so often. Are you eating well?"

Ah. He's getting around to something. Thor shrugged. "Well enough." He patted his stomach, which was large, but _very_ solid. "I am easy to satisfy."

"Good. Good." Odin beckoned him over to the pool. "Tell me, son, what you make of these."

Thor walked over and looked into the pool. It showed two young girls. They were walking into a village, holding an animated conversation. One carried an axe, and the other a short spear.

"Hmmmâ€¦ the one with the axe is quite pretty." Thor tugged his beard. "So this is what you do all day, I see. Mother would be very displeased."

He glanced over to his father, who had raised an eyebrow, and was smiling broadly.

Thor gave an exaggerated, raised-hand shrug. "She's a brave girl. She has shown courage. She needed a bit of help." He pointed a finger at Odin. "You aren't going to bring this up to _Sif_, are you? She has a habit of taking things the wrong way."

Odin gave a short laugh. "You act as if there is any way to keep _any_ secret at all from the women here. That has proven impossible."

He grew serious. "No, son, what I want to know is why you and Loki _both_ are so interested in this girl. The last I saw, you were still going to punish him for cutting Sif's hair." Odin leaned over the pool, resting his hands on the edge. "How does this connect with the _boy_?"

Thor frowned. "Father, weâ€¦ I have done _nothing_ that could harm the boy. I only wish to help in my own way. Do you feel I have done anything _wrong_? Tell me."

Odin tapped the fingers of one hand on the edge of the pool. "I know

why Loki is interested in this. But the two of you have never agreed on anything, even as children." He narrowed his eyes. "This sudden cooperation is too odd to ignore."

Thor returned the gaze. "This young woman is close to him. She is a shield-maiden. I only help to protect him. Is that not what you want?"

Odin's eyes returned to the pool. The two girls were entering a large building. He stroked his chin. There was a minute of silence.

"Father? Could there be any chance that Freya is right?" Thor looked down and scuffed his foot on the floor. "She has many followers now." He looked up to his father's face. "I choose to follow the Prophecy. It has not failed us yet." He looked out the open wall. "It should be so easy to take her words as the ramblings of a madwoman."

He looked back to his father. "But you could put a stop to this, if you wanted. What really confuses some of us is that you don't!"

Odin smiled. "Always the man of action, aren't you? Our laws come from the days of the war. We must obey them, for the sake of our people. We eachâ€¦ even myselfâ€¦ have rules we must follow. To deny them could return us to the anarchy that almost destroyed many of the realms."

Odin sighed. "I do not like the trouble Freya stirs up. I do not believe in her ways. But we fight in the realms for people to believe what they want, and to live the lives they themselves choose. Even here, I must respect that."

Odin smiled at his son. "You always make me proud, son. You have done nothing wrong in this. Justâ€¦ let me know when you decide to get involved."

Thor smiled back. "Yes, father."

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"No."

"Come on! Won't you let him kidnap me just once?"

"I see any kidnapping going on, and you're both dragon chow."

"Humph. If I'm helping you, I think you should at least let me borrow him some."

"That's not the problem. It's the parts of him you want to borrow I don't like."

"Well, somebody should get some use out of them!"

"Wellâ€¦ Iâ€¦ justâ€¦ wellâ€¦" Astrid started turning pink.

Ruffnut laughed. "It's so much fun to watch you _squirm_! You really don't know what to do with him, do you?" She leaned over the table. "You know, not every girl interested in him is a stuck-up virgin about it. I bet _somebody_ gets tired of _talking_ about him."

Astrid froze, the piece of cheese halfway to her mouth. She looked around the Great Hall, as if women were even then conspiring to steal Hiccup. Such things were not frowned on very much, as long as no '_complications_' came out of it, and even that usually meant a quick marriage to patch the issue. Quite a few babies had born seven months after the announcements. Astrid knew. She was one of them.

And there were some beautiful young widows on Berk. Ones who have had _practice_.

Astrid sighed. She put down the cheese, her appetite gone. "I don't get it. He's still the same skinny, awkward boy he was last week, but women act like he's Thor himself. Yeah, he's a big hero, but he's stillâ€¦| _him_."

Ruffnut smiled. "You saw it, though. Hel, _everybody_ saw it! He flew a _Night Fury_ right down the throat of that monster! Don't tell me you aren't impressed by _that_." She shrugged. "And these women had fathers and brothers on that island. They're so happy everyone came back alive they'd bed him just to thank him. Maybe even a few with _husbands_. I'll bet that right nowâ€¦|"

Just then, there was the _clack_ of a plate hitting the table. Tuffnut sat down with his mug. "So, still deciding who's going to marry Hiccup?" he put in.

Ruffnut kicked her brother under the table. "Yeah, we're cutting down the list. Didn't see _your_ name on it, though."

Tuffnut nodded while he rubbed his sore shin. "Yeah, it would sure be a nice job. Waitâ€¦| don't the elders kind ofâ€¦| frown on that sort of thing?"

Ruffnut shrugged. "Not really. Remember Grothnar the Dainty?"

Tuffnut nodded. "Yeah. He threw a shield away in the middle of a battle because it clashed with his outfit." He rubbed his chin, strangely thoughtful. "Hey, big house, married to the Chiefâ€¦| sounds _fun_."

Astrid was having a hard time holding back her laughter. "You forgot one really important thing, though."

Tuffnut looked at her. "What? I've got the hair for it. I can cook as good as Ruff."

Ruffnut was snickering. "Not to mention you're prettier than some of the girls."

Astrid pointed a finger at Tuffnut. "You would have to bear the Chief an _heir_!"

Tuffnut looked at her. "So, what's the problem with that?"

Astrid held a hand to her side. She couldn't stop this much longer. "Tuff, you _do_â€¦ know whereâ€¦ _babies_ come from, don't you?" She was chewing on her tongue.

Tuffnut nodded. "Well, yeah! I'm not _stupid_, you know."

Both girls stared wide-eyed at him.

Tuffnut looked from one to the other. "They come from the Healer House."

Astrid exploded in laughter loud enough for half the hall to stop and stare. Ruffnut was banging her head on the table.

Tuffnut frowned. "_What_? That's what happens! The women go to the Healer House, and a few days later they leave with a baby! _Anybody_ can do that!"

Ruffnut wiped tears from her eyes with the palm of a hand. "Dad never _did_ have that talk with you, did he?"

Tuffnut turned to Astrid. "Hey, are we talking about Ruff's Snoggletog present again?"

Ruffnut perked up. "_Present_? What present?"

Astrid was lying on her back on the bench seat, holding her side. She slowly pulled herself upright again. Wiping her eyes with a sleeve, she said; "No, Tuff, I don't think so."

She got up to leave. "But if you talk to your family about it, I _really_ want to read that marriage contract before Stoick gets it."

Ruffnut got up to leave with her. "I just want to be there when he asks _dad_!"

The two of them walked out, snickering and wiping their eyes. Astrid still held a hand to her cramped side. "_Gods_, I needed that!"

As Ruffnut closed the door behind them, she looked at Astrid. "So, what present is Tuff getting me?"

Astrid's laughter could be heard over half the village.

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Later, in a corner of the Great Hall, Stoick was pacing back and forth in front of a table. Fishlegs was sitting there, parchment and charcoal at the ready.

Stoick was hiding his joy at this. For years, he had put up with snide comments, pity, and even direct insults about his useless son. He had put up with others bragging about the exploits of their own children.

The worst was _Bertha_. In the past years, it was always; '_My daughter killed three pirates with a dagger_', and; '_My daughter

shot a dragon in the eye with a bow at forty yards_', and '_My daughter defeated our best warrior armed only with a mug of ale_'."

But now it was _different_. He looked at Fishlegs and cleared his throat. "Take this down, lad."

"_To Big-Boobied Bertha, Chief of the Bog Burglar tribe, _and so forth_."_

"_I wish to inform you of great events that have taken place. If you have not yet seen, dragon raids have dropped off, or stopped completely. The details of this are the most amazing tale you have ever heard."_

"_The raids were because, all along, a great Queen dragon made them raid us for food. Bertha, this dragon could have sat on your island and crushed it like a bug."_

"_This great evil dragon has been killed, by none other than my son, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third."_

"_And the method of this great feat is even more astounding. Let it be known that my son, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, has discovered ways to tame and make friends with dragons. The dragons we once battled for our food and our very lives were the same ones who helped defeat this Queen."_

"_And my son, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, has trained others to ride and fight with dragons. He is the leader of our group of courageous, battle-proven dragon riders."_

"_And I will have you know that for my son, no ordinary dragon would do. My son, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, rides no less than the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself!"_

"_And my son, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, rode his Night Fury into the very jaws of this creature from Hel, saving not only every warrior from our own village, but perhaps even every village in the North."_

"_There are instructions for you to help make sure there are no more deaths from dragons. I include them with this letter as a special favor to our ally of long standing."_

"_Should you need any assistance, please request it. I will ask my son, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, who rides a Night Fury itself, to give you what help you need."_

"Sign it; _Stoick the Vast, Chief of the Hairy Hooligan Tribe, Berk_, and so forth."

"_Now_, take that, you old _bitch_! _HAhaHAHAhahahaha_!"

"_Ahem_, don't put down that last part, there."

*_scratch_*_scratch_*_scratch_*

Stoick turned to Fishlegs. "Now, pretty that up the way you usually

do, lad. And send them a copy of those things you had us do for the village. And make sure it gets to Johann's boat tonight."

Stoick turned, but smiled and looked back at Fishlegs. "By the way, put a note at the very bottom of the letter. '_Bertha, did I happen to mention that the Hero and dragon master is none other than my son, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third_?'"

Fishlegs gave Stoick a big grin. "I'm rather sure she got the point, sir. Perhaps I could make it a _little_ more obvious?"

Stoick laughed. "But I wouldn't want to rub it in, now, would I?" He winked as he turned to leave.

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8. Changes

****Changes.****

Astrid got up the next morning still tired. She had tossed and turned all night, her sleep interrupted by dreams of the people and events of the past week. She dressed and went to the kitchen to see if anything was lying around.

Her mother was finishing up some bread, the smell filling the room. "Just in time." She said as a yawning Astrid sat at the table.

Astrid looked at her mother. Vigdis Hofferson was still a beauty. There was no doubt that Astrid was her daughter. Her father, or _stepfather_, really, had left already. Astrid needed advice, and despite her embarrassment, here was the first person to ask.

"Mom" she began. "How did you feel about marrying dad? I mean, my real father. What was it like for you? Was it arranged? Did you know him? Did you _like_ him?"

Vigdis was cutting pieces of bread. "Slow down a little." She poured some fresh yak milk into a mug and grabbed some cheese. "Here, eat something while I tell you." She shoved a plate and mug to her daughter and sat down.

"This wouldn't have anything to do with a certain young dragon rider, would it?" she smiled.

Astrid turned a bit pink, holding a piece of bread up to her mouth with both hands. "Wellâ€¦ maybe."

Vigdis poured herself a glass of milk. "I thought so. You've been unusually thoughtful lately." She sat back. "You were old enough to remember your father. What do you remember?"

Astrid thought. "Well, he was loud." Vigdis laughed. Astrid went on; "But he was fun. He liked to carry me around. And he was always kissing you."

Vigdis nodded. "He was all that and more. I started to fall in love with him during dragon training. His skill with weapons was nowhere

near his desire to fight dragons. I ended up teaching him in the afternoons. I never knew anyone so intent on listening to what I had to say. He wasn't ashamed to be learning from a girl his age."

She sighed. "We were betrothed that spring. Both families agreed quite easily. And yes, both of us were very pleased."

Astrid frowned. "There hasn't been so much singing and laughing here sinceâ€¦ since heâ€¦"

Vigdis reached out, and Astrid put her hand in her mother's. "Astridâ€¦ Augst is a good man. It's no secret to him I don't feel the same as with your father. His wife and my husband had both been gone a few years. There were some hard times those years."

Vigdis looked out the open window. "We both married for convenience, I think. We were just used to being with someone. I run the house and he does the farm. We do our best to make sure you have a good home." She sighed. "No, it's not the same. I'm a good wife to him, and I have learned to love him some." She looked at her daughter. "I'm sorry if that disappoints you."

Vigdis patted Astrid's hand. "Now, tell me about your man."

Astrid put down the bread she was nibbling on. "It's justâ€¦ I don't know, mom. A few weeks ago I hated him for getting better at dragon training. Then I sawâ€¦ a new part of himâ€¦ a brave part." She spilled the beans, and told her mother about finding Toothless, and that first ride.

Vigdis smile got brighter. "So, that explains it. You were different then." She got serious. "You have to decide how you feel about him, Astrid. I've heard the talk. Stoick will have him married off soon."

Vigdis got thoughtful. "Should I speak to your father about this? Should we seek an arrangement with Stoick, too?" She winked. "I don't think either of you would disagreeâ€¦ do you?"

Astrid felt her face getting rather warm. She had to face reality here. She was going to be married soon, anyway. And her stomach did somersaults thinking about Hiccup lately. And her anger rose every time she thought of him marrying someone elseâ€¦ especially Ruff. Was it enough? Was it worth finding out? And what would he think?

Astrid stared at the floor. "Yes." she said in a faint voice. "Yesâ€¦ talk to him."

Her mother smiled as she kissed her daughter's forehead. "Now you run along, dear."

As the door closed behind Astrid, Vigdis frowned. She knew her husband's plans for their daughter's future, and Hiccup wasn't in them. This was going to take some work.

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Gobber sat down in the Great Hall across from Stoick. He was a bit

singed from working in the forge. He had some yak roast. He wanted mutton, but Tuffnut had warned him about a bad batch the other day.

Stoick welcomed him by handing him a list of metalworking needs. "Mornin'. The kids are changin' up the dragon arena, and need some bits."

Gobber looked it over while chewing. "Be a few days. I jes' finished that thingy for Hiccup's dragon. Bad luck the tail fin is the same side as hisâ€¦ accident." Stoick was touchy about Hiccup's injury, since he blamed himself for the whole mess.

Stoick's face fell. "Gobberâ€¦ what can Iâ€¦"

Gobber waved his hook. "Quit beatin' yerself up about it, Stoick. He'll deal with it jes' fine. I know the lad."

Stoick had talked to Snotlout and the twins, as well as Fishlegs. He knew that there had been no time to plan. Hiccup had simply ridden in to battle as best he could. Stoick had led almost his entire tribe into a slaughter. Nightmares haunted him about it. Yet, there was pride there, too. Hiccup had taken charge, and led others into the fiercest battle any had ever seen. Everyone thought that half a leg was a small price to pay for hundreds of lives, and they gave the boy great respect for it. If Hiccup could deal with it, maybe he should, too.

Gobber finished, picked up the list, and stood up. "Look, Stoick. Tonight we'll have a few mugs and talk. Meet me at the Mead Hall jes' after dark." He had noted the worried look on Stoick's face. "Ye need a few hours off, Chief. It's no good to Hiccup nor anyone else to let this eat ya'." Gobber winked. "Besides, I got a few ideas meself about marryin' off the lad." That got a raised eyebrow from Stoick.

Gobber thought as he started to leave. "In our day, nowâ€¦ we'd have a turn and go Viking, and do some decent lootin' and wenchin' before we settled down. But he never struck me as the type."

Stoick nodded, he had to agree there. As Gobber left, he thumbed through the stack of marriage contracts again.

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As Astrid walked up the hill to the Chief's house, she saw Snotlout sitting there. She hadn't seen much of him this past week. He had volunteered for most of the escort duty for the boats, spending days at sea with the ships returning everyone.

"Good morning, Snotlout." She simply said. "I take it he's not up yet?"

Snotlout shook his head. "Not yet."

Astrid decided to rib him a little. "Too bad you're not going to be Chief now, isn't it?"

Snotlout stood up with clenched fists. "You just LAY OFF, Astrid!

You don't know _nothing_!"

Astrid watched him as he stormed off down the hill. He had never in his _life_ been that angry with her. She might be concerned, except she had quite enough to worry about already. She shrugged, and walked up to the door.

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Ruffnut and Tuffnut were in the dragon arena. They had fed the dragons that were there, even though most of them were stuffed from the new urn the village had installed. They were scratching their dragon, who was eating up the attention. Ruffnut still said Barf was better looking.

"Oh, yeah? Well, just how did you come up with that stupid name, anyway?" Tuffnut shot back.

"I thought of it after looking at you. How did you get something ridiculous like _Belch_?"

Tuffnut shrugged. "I was sitting around thinking after last meal the other night. I had several great ideas. I picked _Belch_ becauseâ€| wellâ€| I don't think he would like being named _Fart_."

Ruffnut laughed and threw a fish at him. "Well, good for him you weren't thinking of a name in the outhouse!"

Tuffnut dodged the fish, which Belch deftly snagged out of the air. "By the way." He mentioned. "I haven't seen you wear a _dress_ to Hiccup's today. Given up on him?"

Ruffnut got serious. "I found out somebody needs him more." She shrugged. "It's no big deal, really."

Tuffnut got a confused look. "What? You're as good as anybody else! Did somebody _threaten_ you? Like _Astrid_?"

Ruffnut gave him a stare. "Why the brotherly concern stuff now?"

Tuffnut avoided her eyes. "Well, I _am_ your brother. And nobody's allowed to do anything to you but _me_! Nobody's allowed to hit you, or insult you, or put a dead fish in your pillow, orâ€|"

Ruffnut yelled; "_That was you?_" She launched onto him, pummeling his chest and stomach as he fell, holding his arms in front of himself.

Barf and Belch looked at each other. Barf rolled his eyes, then reached down and grabbed the girl by the vest. The dragon slung her ten feet away, while Belch licked Tuffnut lying on the ground. Tuffnut sputtered through the dragon spit as he slowly stood up.

"Thanksâ€| I think." Tuffnut said as he watched his sister use a weapons rack to haul herself to her feet. "I just wanted to say you're just as good a girl as Astrid. Well, you're a _girl_, anyway."

Ruffnut brushed herself off. "Thanksâ€¦ I think." She kept a wary eye on Barf as she walked back over. "Look, marrying him seemed like a good idea, but I think he should marry who he wants. Get it _now_?"

Tuffnut scratched his head. "Is this a girl thing? 'Cause I was really looking forward to living in that big house."

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Astrid quietly opened the door to the Chief's house and stuck her head in. Berta was sitting in the chair by the fire. Hiccup was still lying there asleep. Berta saw her, and waved her in.

Astrid leaned her axe against the wall, and walked over to look at Hiccup. "Nothing yet?" she asked.

Berta shook her head. "Afraid not." She pointed to the stool. "Sit down, Astrid. We need to talk a little."

Astrid sat on the stool with her hands in her lap. Berta leaned forward. "I'll let you know, Astrid. Stoick asked me if I wanted to marry Hiccup." She watched Astrid's face closely. It looked like the entire range of emotions was fighting for possession of it. There was a moment of anger, a second of confusion, and a touch of disappointment.

Finally she looked at the floor. "That's it, then." was all she said.

Berta smiled slightly. "Is it, Astrid?" The young blond looked up at her. "I'd make him a _good_ wife, I really would. But I'm not much for adventure anymore." She looked at the still form on the bed. "I think he needs someone who will go with him wherever he goes."

Berta reached out and laid a hand on Astrid's, clasped in her lap. "He needs someone strongâ€¦ and as brave as _he_ is. I don't think he'll be one for sitting around, not now that he has a dragon." She took Astrid's hands in hers. "There's one good reason for me to say _no_, Astrid. What is it?"

Astrid looked into her eyes. She found her voice again. "You don't love him."

Berta had a sad smile this time. "That's right. I'd cook for him, and clean the house, and put him back together when he comes homeâ€¦ I'd even give him children. But I _don't_ love him."

Astrid tilted her head. "But there's lots of arranged marriages. Why would it be any different?"

Berta laid a hand on Astrid's cheek. "I've _had_ my great love, dear. I think _everyone_ should have that chance." She smiled again, somewhat brighter. "If _Hiccup_ could choose between _us_, who do you think _he'd_ prefer to be stuck with?"

Astrid blushed at that. Berta went on. "Why don't you talk to him when he wakes up? Find out how you feel. I don't think he'll be like most men. He's better."

Astrid slowly got up and walked to the door. "I intend to. Talk to him, I mean." She picked up her axe.

"And Berta? Thanks." She said as she left.

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After Astrid left, Berta was straightening up some. She checked her bag of supplies, and noticed it was out of several things. Then she reached in and pulled out the strange goblet she had found on the beach. She had completely forgotten about it in everything. She dropped it back in the bag, and slung it over her shoulder.

He should be fine for a bit. She thought. She looked at Toothless, all this time lying still by the fire. "Can you watch Hiccup, Toothless?" She pointed to the boy. "Toothless. Watch. _Hiccup_." The dragon looked at her and blinked. Then he moved closer to the bed.

"I'll be back in just a while." She said as she walked quickly out the door to Gothi's.

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Astrid decided to go by the forge. She heard the distant clanging of Gobber hammering on something. Looking up as she walked, she saw Snotlout and Fishlegs flying on their dragons. They were doing slow, lazy circles around the village. Fishlegs was still trying to master the basics, the first being to stay on comfortably. Snotlout was practicing turning, except that Hookfang seemed more interested in not getting too far from the large fish urn in the square. That was _one_ pair that the dragon was certainly smarter than his _rider_.

Walking into the warmth of the forge, she was greeted by some ungentlemanly language as Gobber wrestled with a long piece of metal. He had a hammer attached onto his arm with the missing hand, and trying to hold the bar steady with the one hand he had left.

"Let me help with that, Gobber." Astrid put down her axe and grabbed the wobbly end.

"Thanks, lass." He nodded. "Jes' hold that end steady a few." He pounded the other end into a rough square. After a few minutes of shaping, he grabbed near the end. "Let go, now, Astrid." He took it and stuck it in the tall, thin barrel of water, where it hissed and steamed up the room.

"Ahh, thanks." Gobber brushed off his leather apron. "Wha' can I do for you, now?"

Astrid shrugged. "Just passing by."

Gobber smiled. "Wouldn't be lookin' for any news, would we?"

Astrid shrugged again. "I just thoughtâ€¦" She was still for a few seconds. Then she clenched her hands into fists and waved them at the air. "_Aarrrrgh!_ _Dammit_, why won't he just wake _up_? Why can't I

talk to him? Why can't Iâ€¦" She looked over at Gobber, who was smiling broadly.

She calmed down, unclenching her fists. "You know him better than anyone, Gobber. All this talk about _marriage_! What's he going to _do_ about it?"

Gobber rubbed his beard with his one hand. "Figgered you'd get around to that. Now when you say '_he_', you mean Stoick or Hiccup? 'Cause that seems to be two different things right now."

Astrid paused. "Either one."

Gobber nodded. "Now look, lass. Don't get your undies in a bunch jes' yet. I'm gonna have a wee talk with Stoick. And I don't think you have to concern yerself about Hiccup none."

Astrid looked at him. "What do you mean?"

Gobber chuckled. "Come on! Ya n'er noticed? He's been smitten wi' you since you was bothâ€¦ wellâ€¦ much younger. Ever' time you walked by the shop, I couldn't get him to pay no mind for hours."

Astrid stamped her foot. "Did _everybody_ know about this but _me_?"

Gobber thought. "Well, Dirstman the Blind might not, but thatâ€¦"

"_AARrrrrgggggh_! Why do I have to know all this _now_?" Astrid was getting mad.

Gobber shook his head. "Ye do seem a bit slow about it, if ye ask me." He picked up a bundle of leather and metal. "I'm jes' gonna run this up to the Chief's house. It's for yer young man and his dragon."

He walked to the door. "I think ever'thing is gonna be fine, girl. Just wait." He left her thinking there in the shop.

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Stoick walked up to the main village from the docks. Everything seems to be going too well. There had been no dragon problems at all. A few strays had fed at the urns, looked around, and left. A couple had stuck around, and one villager was scratching one on the nose. The teens were flying around. Except for one thing, it was a beautiful day in Berk.

Stoick had done everything that he felt Hiccup wanted. The people were happy. The village was bustling with activity, and the _best_ thingâ€¦ people were talking with _hope_ about the future. Stoick smiled in spite of his worries when he thought of that. Berk would not die out. The people would _not_ starve. Maybe, _just_ _maybe_, there would be more births now.

And _his_ _son_ was responsible. Now he just had to have a chance to show him.

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Berta walked into Gothi's. She put down the bag to get the items she needed to restock it. Gothi sat in her favorite chair, drinking a mug of tea.

Berta pulled out the goblet, and thought a minute.

"Gothi?" She turned and knelt by the elder. "On the beachâ€¦ when I was treating Hiccupâ€¦ I found this." She held out the goblet to the elder. "It had something powerful in it. It's covered in runes, and I don't know half of them."

Gothi reached out and plucked the goblet from Berta's hand. She looked at it. She slowly turned it. Her eyes got wider than Berta ever remembered seeing them. She sniffed the inside, drawing back quickly. She looked up at Berta with a question in her eyes.

Berta shrugged. "I was asleep a few hours. I found this next to his dragon at the camp. Whatever it was, it didn't hurt himâ€¦ he's healing faster than I thought anyone ever could." Berta tapped the table. "Astrid was the only one there, and she was asleep when I got back. She claims nobody else was there." She thought a second. "The only otherâ€¦ personâ€¦ there was the dragon, and he wasn't put out. I know that dragon wouldn't let anyone harm Hiccup."

She pointed to the goblet. "I don't know what it was, but I begin to wish we had more of it."

Gothi sat the goblet down on the edge of the table, nodded, and waved Berta off. Berta went back to the shelves, and replaced the things she needed in her satchel. She picked it up, wished Gothi a good day, and closed the door behind her.

As soon as Berta had left, Gothi snatched the goblet back up. She read slowly as she turned the strange cup in her hands. Frowning, she put it down and went to the shelf of ancient writings that had collected in the elder's hut over generations. Some of the markings were older than even she knew. And that worried her.

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Astrid was still thinking at the forge. She really didn't have anywhere else to go at the moment, and the warmth was nice.

Everybody knows about Hiccup but me. Well, now I do too_. But what will she do with that information?

Her head snapped around when she heard running feet and shouting outside. She ran to the door. Several people were trotting up the hill.

"Hey! What's going on?" She asked someone running.

"Hiccup's outside! He's alive!"

****Oops.****

Hiccup slowly became aware of the world. He felt comfortable, and warm. _Death wasn't so bad, after all._ It felt like home.

He opened his eyes slightly. It took a bit to adjust to light again. _Hmmm. Valhalla looks just like my house_. _Wait a minuteâ€¦_ He sat up slightly. He looked around. Toothless was quivering with joy. He bonked Hiccup's face with his nose. The excited dragon stepped on Hiccup's stomach. "I'm in my house." He looked at Toothless. "Ahhhâ€¦ you're in my house. Does dad know you're here?" He watched as the happy dragon clattered around the rafters, knocking furniture around.

He sat up to get out of bed when he felt something funny. Or maybe it was what he was _not_ feeling. Hanging his legs off the bed, he saw that his left leg ended below the knee, with the space taken up by a metal and wooden replacement.

Okay. Get a grip. It's not the end of the world. _I'm still alive. That's got to be good, right? _ _Anything less than dead can be dealt with._ Breathing slowly to get himself under control, he considered this. He fell. Into an exploding giant dragon. By all reason and logic, he shouldn't be alive at all. He looked over at the smiling dragon. _I'll bet he had something to do with this._

Toothless came over and smelled the metal leg. He looked up at Hiccup.

Hiccup needed to find out what happened to everyone. He stood up, wobbling on his new leg. He took a step, then another, and almost fell on his face except for Toothless shoving his head under his body. Patting and thanking the dragon, Hiccup turned to the door.

"Let's go, bud." He said as he limped to the door.

He opened the door to a Monstrous Nightmare's head screaming over the village. He slammed the door. He _had_ to know what was going on out there. "Stay here, Toothless." He told the dragon as he opened the door again, slowly looking out.

What he saw was incredible. There were _dragons_ around the town! Snotlout and Fishlegs were cruising by on theirs. There were dragons feeding in a giant urn in the village center, and a couple perched on rooftops. There were people walking around like having dragons underfoot was no big deal.

Hiccup smiled. "That's it. I'm dead."

Stoick could hardly breathe. He was walking towards his house when the door opened. He stared as his son took in the sight of a different village than he remembered. "No." he said. "But you gave it your best shot." Heâ€¦ gentlyâ€¦ for him, patted Hiccup on the back. His son was back! And looked none the worse for wearâ€¦ considering.

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Astrid started running from the forge. She forgot her axe in the rush of emotion. She ran almost to where the group was standing around talking. _Hiccup was okay! He was smiling! He was talking!_

She pushed by a couple of people to stand in front of Hiccup. She smiled at him. _Okay, what now?_ _I've spent a week thinking about this momentâ€¦_ She punched him in the arm. _Oh, really? That'll sure impress him. Good going, you idiot._

Hiccup rubbed his arm. "Is it always going to be this way?
'Causeâ€¦"

Unable to think of something to say without breaking down, or crying, or laughing in his face, she did the only thing she could think of. She grabbed his tunic, and pulled him in for a _kiss_. Right on the lips. In front of Stoick, the village, and the Gods. It was a first for both of them. Astrid thought she might do more of thisâ€¦ at least enough to find out if she likes it as much as that one. Hiccup's face showed what she took for approval, too, if that meant dazed and witless.

"â€¦I could get used to it." He finished.

Astrid looked around at the people. She hoped _that_ would discourage some of the talk. She would lay claim to Hiccup, and she had the axe to back it up. Or, would have, as soon as she got it from the blacksmith shop again.

Stoick watched this with a raised eyebrow. _Hofferson? When did this happen?_

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Hiccup was still adjusting. He was jostled by Stoick and Gobber, and surrounded by the noise, applause, and questions of everybody else. Toothless, tired of waiting, completed the picture by climbing over anyone in his path. Hiccup smiled at him as he settled beside his human.

Gobber handed him the bundle. "It's fer yer beastie. I used all yer old drawins you left."

Hiccup wobbled a little. Gobber reached out his hand and steadied him. Stoick was watching, and stood in front of him, addressing the villagers. "All right, you lot! We can all relax. He's fine. Give him a bit of rest, now. Go on. Go 'bout your business." He shooed the people away. Everyone was happy, since they hadn't known whether to plan a celebration or a funeral. At one, they would drink and tell stories, and at the other they wouldâ€¦ drink and tell stories. It was a Viking thing.

Gobber took back the bundle and held Hiccup by one arm. Astrid came up to the other side. Gobber started leading Hiccup around the path, giving him tips on the finer points of using his new leg. "Aye, yer lucky ye still got yer knee, there. It'd be a bit awkward wi'out it. Ye'll get used ta it soon enough, I'll bet."

Astrid hovered nearby. There wasn't going to be a chance to talk with him anytime soon.

Hiccup listened to Gobber with half his brain, and still looked around the village with the other half. It was everything he had hoped for, ever since he found out how dragons really were.

What now? He thought. _What do I do now?_ _What _can't_ I do now?_

Gobber looked at Hiccup. "Now, ye need some practice, and we could use a bit o' mead! I mean _food_. Why don' we try getting' to the Great Hall, now?"

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Ruffnut was hanging around the clearing where they spent time training. The whole place was filled with trees bearing the marks of Astrid's axe practice.

She was still thinking about _Astrid_, and _Hiccup_, and! She got mad for a second, and threw her spear at one of the trees. The head sank straight and deep into it.

She was yanking it out with a jerk, when a figure dropped out of the next tree.

Ruffnut stared in shock. It was a woman. But this was no normal woman she knew of. She was tall as any man, well-muscled, but still beautiful. Her honey blond hair was in a single braid. She wore a rather short white tunic, with a leather belt and a breastplate. This was the kind of woman that haunted Viking warriors' dreams at night. But all this didn't matter as much as the long, lethal looking spear she held in both hands.

Pointing right at Ruffnut.

The stranger spoke. "Now you'll have to face _me_." A simple statement. A challenge. And one that didn't seem to leave the teen much choice. Ruffnut's hands tightened on the shaft of her spear.

And she was just able to move aside as the point of the stranger's spear missed her face by inches. The speed of this woman was incredible! By the time Ruffnut had jumped to one side, and set her feet solidly, the woman had turned and swept her spear in a wide arc.

Ruffnut barely dove under it, rolling and coming to her feet in a defensive stance.

The stranger smiled. She twirled her spear in one hand. The white painted shaft made a circle in the air in front of her. Then the spear snapped still and she lunged.

Ruffnut blocked it! barely. The shock of the impact almost jarred her hands loose. Then the woman spun her weapon, using the base of the shaft to neatly knock Ruffnut's spear from her hands.

Ruffnut gasped as suddenly, the foot-long, impossibly thin spear head was at her throat. Ruffnut was light-headed and breathing heavily. She looked the woman defiantly in the eyes while muttering a prayer to Thor. She would meet her death as a _Viking_, with her eyes wide

open.

But the woman pulled back the spear. She frowned. "_Hummph_. From what I've heard, I really thought you would give me a better fight than _that_."

Ruffnut began to have the idea she would live to see another sunrise. She straightened up and shrugged. "Who do you think I am? _Astrid_?"

The strange woman tilted her head. "Welllllllâ€¦ _yes_, actually. I was told I could find her here most days. Do you know where she is?"

Ruffnut shook her head. "I'm supposed to help you find my best friend so you can _kill_ her? Nothing doing."

The woman laughed. "_What_? I'm not going to _kill_ anyone!" She looked thoughtful. "At least, I don't _think_ I'm supposed to. I just thought we could have some _fun_. Mortals aren't much of a challenge, usually."

Mortals. She said mortals_. Ruffnut's eyes got wide. "Uhhhâ€¦ if I mayâ€¦ just askâ€¦ _who are you_? I don't mean to _pry_â€¦ I meanâ€¦ if it's gonna make you mad or anything."

The woman smiled and held up a finger. "Ohâ€¦ wait. This is great."

She looked down, and carefully placed her feet shoulder width apart, pointing the toes outward slightly. She sat the butt of her spear beside her right foot, and straightened her arm out. She then looked forward, and placed her left hand on her hip. Then she stood up straight, threw out her chest and in a clear, loud voiceâ€¦

"Hear me! I am the Lady Sif! Warrior of Aasgard and wife of Thor, God of Thunder!"

Then she relaxed and smiled at Ruffnut. "How's that? _Huh_? Pretty good? I've been practicing. Sweetie says I need a good entrance."

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Hiccup was sitting in the Great Hall, eating. It was a surprise to him that he found himself ravenous. Stoick had brought him a plate filled with strips of assorted meats, cheese, and bread. And another. He started slowing down on the third one. Gobber and Stoick sat across from him, and Hiccup was flanked by Fishlegs and Tuffnut.

Fishlegs had a stack of things he had written down during the week, and Tuffnut was filling him in on the gossip.

"We put the urns around the town for stray dragons."

"Humhhh."

"Soâ€¦ _every_ girl in town's been waiting for you to wake

up. "

"Gggmmph?"

"We wrote instructions for everyone, and people areâ€¦ sort ofâ€¦
adopting some of them."

"Hmmm! "

"Oh, and Ruff's been wearing this dress for you lately since you have
to pick out a bride."

"PTHTPhtphttpPTHTtT!" "eeeeeeEEEEEEEE" "Hhhcccccttttt!"

Hiccup was choking. Fishlegs smacked him on the back as hard as he
could. This bounced Hiccup's forehead off the table, but had the
desired effect of dislodging the chunk.

"_WHAT_?" Hiccup sat stiffly, rubbing his head. He stared at Tuffnut,
then over to Stoick.

Stoick looked away. "I was goin' to let you get back on your feet
first. I meant to tell you."

"_Foot_."

"What?"

"Well, really, you can't get on your _feet_ now, can you?"

"Tuffâ€¦ just..." Hiccup sighed. "_Really_, dad? I meanâ€¦ I've never
even been on a _date_ with a girl. Shouldn't I, sort of, well, _know_
something about them first? You know, things likeâ€¦ _talk_ to one,
maybe? At least be in the same _room_?"

Stoick replied; "Son, there'll be plenty of time to get to know her
after you're married. Now eat up. We'll talk about this
tomorrow."

Tuffnut leaned over. "He's going to tell you the one about sheep in
the pasture. Then it gets weird."

Hiccup narrowed his gaze. "This won't be as one-sided as our _last_
big talk, will it, dad? You know, before I almost got killed by a
Nightmare, and ended up being disowned?"

"Probably. But that turned out better than you thought, di'nt
it?"

"I wonder what I'll end up losing this
time?"

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Gothi read the old writings. She read the cup again. It looked brand
new, but the symbols on it were from the earliest days of before her
people even became Vikings. She decided to check the runes.

This was not taken lightly. There were the everyday castings, which
were no problem. _Would there be good fishing? Does this boy love me?

Will the storm be bad?_ These did not touch the power. But when she really needed to commune with the Gods, and they answered, it took something out of her. And at her age, she didn't have much of _anything_ to spare.

She put the flat wooden bowl in her lap. Opening the small leather sack, she poured the runes into the bowl. These were old, handed down to the next elder for twenty generations. Some were so worn they could hardly be read. She closed her eyes. She made her prayers. Still muttering, she tossed the runes in the bowl, and shook it in small circles.

Finishing the ritual, she looked down. Several were grouped together. _Boy_, or _young man_. _Journey_. _Danger_. Another fewâ€¦ _girl_ or _young woman_. _Battle_. There were some at random. _More than one_. What did that mean? More than one battle? More than one Journey? _Together_. The boy and the girl? Who were they?

She needed to get down to the village more often. She needed to know what was going on. But now, she needed a nap.

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Sif frowned as she waved a hand in front of the Viking girl, still frozen in shock. Ruffnut stood there, wide-eyed, slack-jawed, and staring at nothing.

"Hello?" Sif pinched the pale white cheek. She used the grip to shake the girl's head. Her eyes began to focus again.

"_Sweetie_." Ruffnut mumbled. "You call _Thor_ sweetie."

Sif smiled. "Well, I needed something to use in polite company. I couldn't go around calling him _that horny bastard_ all the time, could I?"

Ruffnut whispered; "No, I suppose not." She looked at Sif. "Sweetie?"

Sif stood up straight again. "Look, can we get past that and tell me where I can find Astrid?"

Ruffnut shook her head. "She's out here five or six days a week. I was waiting for her, too."

Sif tapped her cheek with a fingertip. "I don't know about going to the village. But I don't want to make the same mistake twice. Tell me about her so I'll know her."

Ruffnut thought. "Well, she's not as pretty as me. And she's kind ofâ€¦" Ruffnut held her finger up to her head and made small circles with it. "â€¦slow. So you'll have to talk clear and loud. And she's got some kind of bugs in her hair, so I'd watch touching her, or anyone she's been near." Then she smiled. "But you can't mistake her, 'cause she's the only one in a leather skirt with spikes and skulls on it. Oh, and she carries an axe around all the time."

Sif thought. _Hmmm_. Strange one_. "Okay, so I'm going to wait here, and you make sure she gets here."

Ruffnut looked at her through lowered brow; "Not gonna kill her?"

"Nope. Not even a little."

"And you want to surprise her just like you did me?" Ruffnut asked this with a sly smile.

"That's what I intend."

"Why?"

"What?"

"_Why_? What's a _Goddess_ want with Astrid?"

"Well, _technically_, I'm not a Goddess. I'm an Aasgardian that married a Demi-God."

"Close enough for us, but not what I asked."

Sif pondered. How much could she tell this one? "Look. She loves this _boy_. And for the _moment_, this boy is important toâ€| someone _upstairs_."

Ruffnut was startled. "Hiccup. _Hiccup?_ And what's this about _love_?"

Sif sighed. "Frigg is never wrong about that, I assure you. This girl is to protect thisâ€| _Hiccup_." Sif got a stern face. "And that is all I can tell you. You must keep it to yourself, or I may have to come back andâ€| not be so nice."

"Look, Lady, if you were just _playing_ earlier, I don't want anything to do withâ€| not so nice. But it's getting late, and she may not get here today. But I'll make sure she's here tomorrow _early_."

"Then go. And deliver the girl, or bring me news of her death."

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Hiccup had finally escaped the Great Hall. Toothless had waited outside, and Hiccup limped out carrying his new fin. He attached the saddle, the fin and controls. Checking everything, it looked like Gobber did a fair job of following his plans. Already, Hiccup could see some changes he wanted to make.

As he pulled himself onto Toothless's back, he could feel the dragon quivering with joy. He latched the foot into the place Gobber had installed, and noticed it even had a clip to keep it from slipping out. He looked back as he tested the controls, noting how the fin moved with the slightest pressure.

Assured it was working, he faced forward and braced himself. "Let's fly, bud!"

Stuck on the ground over a week, the night Fury launched himself

straight up. The first few turns were a bit scary. On the old system, Hiccup could move his foot to control the dragon's fin. But now, without an ankle joint to help, he found he had to rock his entire leg.

After almost hitting the mast of a longboat, Hiccup aimed higher. "Let's take it easy a bit, Toothless. I've got to get the hang of this." They started with slow, careful turns and dives. Finally, Hiccup felt he had the idea down, so he aimed straight up.

Climbing high enough that Berk was just a dot, Hiccup leveled off. This was what made it all worthwhile. No more hiding. He could come and go as he pleased, and on his dragon. The weeks of sneaking, and hiding, and working in the forge in the middle of the night were over.

Now, he took the time to think about his new problems. Marriage? Why now? What possible change, other than missing a leg, could have happened to make somebody want to marry him?

He thought. They had destroyed the Queen. He supposed that gave him some points with the people. And what did Tuff mean by 'pick out'? More than one? And could he choose? He thought about it. If he could choose anyone at all, it would beâ€¦

But there's no way. "I guess I'll just have to talk with dad, then." He said to nobody in particular. He aimed downward to the village.

As he got closer, he saw that the others were climbing to meet him. He picked out Snotlout, Astrid, and Fishlegs bringing up the rear. He waved, and got excited waves in return.

"Okay, bud, let's show 'em we still got it!" He told the dragon, as he aimed towards the rocks. Toothless barked, and dove at high speed past the others, who now had to turn and try to keep up.

They had a fun time chasing each other around the ships, the buildings, the outlying sea stacks, and the forest. Hiccup's leg began getting a little sore and stiff, so he decided it was time to land. He landed just outside his house.

He was standing there massaging his leg when the others landed nearby. They walked up to him. For a minute, the four of them just stood there grinning at each other. It was the first time together since the morning of the battle.

"You okay?" This from Snotlout.

"Yeah. I guess this'll take some time. Not bad for one day, though."

Astrid watched him closely. "It's amazing you did anything at all. They're talking about how your leg got better faster than usual."

Fishlegs asked; "How does it feel? I meanâ€¦ not feelâ€¦ orâ€¦"

Hiccup laughed. "I get you, Fish. It's weird, really. Sometimes it

feels like my foot itches. But it's not there."

Fishlegs nodded. "Gobber says it does that sometimes. Like the body doesn't know something's missing."

Hiccup shook his leg a bit. "Right now it's a bit sore, so come on in if you want."

Astrid quickly walked to his side and grabbed his arm. "Here. Your first couple of days somebody should help while you get used to it." She gave him just the smallest amount of support as he worked his way up the stairs.

Hiccup looked at her. "Are you really sure I'm not dead? People are touching me without acting like I'm a week-old fish. They're talking to me, andâ€¦ I just don't get all this."

Astrid turned Hiccup to face her. She grabbed the front of his vest. "Hiccup, there's been a big change in how everyone thinks about you. You're a hero now. Everybody saw it. You should have seen them when they thought you were dead! And when they found out you weren't."

"So yes, people will talk to you now, and touch youâ€¦ andâ€¦" She pulled him to her for a kiss. This one felt better.

She stood back a foot. "You know, you could help out some when I do that. Makes me feel you don't want it."

Hiccup looked down. "Iâ€¦ it's not about want. Itâ€¦ it's more aboutâ€¦ what to do." He looked into those blue eyes. "This sort of stuff never happens to me. Ever. Youâ€¦ you forget I'mâ€¦ stillâ€¦ me."

She moved to where their noses were almost touching. "I never forgot that. I just didn't know what the real you was until last week. Your dad said it best. You did what was necessary to protect our people. You proved you were a real Viking all along, and nobody will ever forget it."

Hiccup raised an eyebrow. "Are all the people going to kiss me?"

Astrid gave him a glare. "They'd better not. At least, not the girls."

It was her turn to look down. "Just try to forgive me for all the time weâ€¦ I mean I, wasted. Please."

She turned and opened the door. "Let's get a fire going. It's getting cold. And you need to get off that leg."

She looked out, and Fishlegs and Snotlout were gone, along with Meatlug and Hookfang. "Guess they thought we wanted to be alone." She went inside to start a fire. Hiccup and Toothless followed.

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Ruffnut barged into the Great Hall. She scanned the place looking for

Astrid. It was getting dark, so she was off the hook for tonight. She saw Snotlout and Fishlegs sitting there eating and talking.

She went to get some food and a drink. She really needed something to drink. She kept hearing snatches of conversation, and noticed that everybody seemed rather happy tonight.

She plopped down next to Fishlegs. "What's going on?"

Fishlegs looked at her. "You haven't been here today, have you?"

Snotlout explained. "Hiccup's back from the deadâ€¦ or, wherever he was."

Ruffnut thought. "That explains why I couldn't find Astrid today."

"Yeah, she's with him now." Fishlegs filled in. "He's walking and everything! We even went for a dragon ride."

Snotlout nodded. "They're planning a big party to celebrate the end of the war. Stoick's making it a real big thing, now his boy's back with us."

"And it's for all of us." Fishlegs added. "I mean, all the ones who fought on dragons." He looked down. "They talk about how brave we were."

Ruffnut looked at the large young man. "Why so glum? You were brave. I think we all did pretty good, considering we didn't have a plan. And, like, only ten minutes of training. We did okay."

Fishlegs looked at her. "I just don't feel that brave. We got knocked out of the sky, and I spent more time just trying not to beâ€¦" He shuddered. "â€¦stepped on."

Ruffnut thought for a second. She put out her hand, and laid it on top of Fishleg's. "That's not the point. You were there. Every one of us has been thinking about if we had just been a bit faster, or a bit smarter, or just moreâ€¦ something, then Hiccup would still have his leg."

"But Hiccup was the crazy one. He knew all along that Toothless was the only one that could hurt that thing. He knew a Night Fury was the only thing fast enough to fight it. He gave us all jobs to do, but I think he always intended to keep the really bad one for himself. We didn't know that then."

She looked over to Snotlout. "We all helped each other out there. And I think we did okay. And right now, I'm just too happy he's still alive to worry about him losing a leg that much."

Snotlout raised an eyebrow. "You're being all serious for a change. What happened to you?"

Ruffnut gave him a small smile. "Maybe I figured out this is just part of a bigger thing than us. Now if you excuse me, I'm starving, so shut it a while." She dug into her food like a famished wolf.

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10. Something Missing

****Something Missing.****

Astrid put Hiccup in the chair closest the fire, while she got it going. Toothless lay beside the chair. As she put some larger pieces of wood on the growing flame, Hiccup watched her. It was still a wonder to him. Astrid, in his house, taking care of him. He still hadn't shaken the idea completely that he really was dead, and this was some sort of prize.

Astrid had the fire growing now, and she turned around, sitting on the hearth. She saw Hiccup looking at her. He had that look he got when he was trying to figure out a particularly difficult problem. After the other teens, she hadn't noticed how quiet he could be. When he thought about something, it was with his whole being.

Astrid pushed hair from her eyes. "What?" It was like he was trying to see through her.

"I am in Valhalla. That's the only thing it could be. My fatherâ€¦ dragons and Vikings at peaceâ€¦" He looked down, breaking the gaze. "â€¦you. Don't you get rewarded with everything you wanted in life when you die honorably?"

Astrid felt her heart clench. After what her mother, and especially Gobber had said, she had never really seen it. If she had, she didn't understand. Hiccup had placed herâ€¦ herâ€¦ up there with the other dreams he considered unobtainable.

She slid over and sat at his feet. She placed her right hand on his left knee. She felt him flinch. She began massaging the knee area in small movements.

"That doesn't bother me." She said. "You got it honorably in battle. It shows what you gave for all of us."

He looked up into her face.

Astrid stared back. "Why me, Hiccup? All these years. Why me? Was it because I'm sort of pretty?"

Hiccup gave her a small smile. "Sort of prettyâ€¦ like a Monstrous Nightmare is sort of dangerous."

He looked into the fire. "But that's not it."

Astrid waited. She was getting used to his silences. She was figuring out he needed to be pushed into talk when it was about him. "Well, why then?"

Hiccup shrugged. "Why is that important?"

Astrid's voice got a bit harder. "Because I want to remember what you say right now."

Hiccup turned to her. "You used that line before."

Astrid smiled. "And I'll use it every time I need to. Because I'll never get to know what you're thinking unless I do." Then her face got serious. "And I really need to know this. It's important, Hiccup. To me."

Hiccup faced back to the fire. "Even when we were youngâ€¦ ummâ€¦ young-er, you always knew what you were going to do. You were always the best at everything you set out to do. The others respected you. Even adults took pride in you. People talked about how great you were, and how you were going to be one of the best warriors Berk ever knew."

He sighed. "Strong. Fearless. Respected. When I looked at you, I saw everything I wasn't." He muttered. "The fact that you're the most beautiful girl on Midgard was just something extra."

"Excuse me, what was that last part?"

"That when I looked at-"

"No, not that. The part about the most beautiful girl on Midgard."

"Sounds like you heard it just fine."

"I know. I just like hearing it. From you."

She stood straight up on her knees, putting her face on a level with Hiccup's as he turned to her. "Look, I'm not as smart as you. I'll never be. But you can think of the most amazing things. And I'll bet there's more ideas in there since you have this dragon thing worked out. I can't keep up with you there. I'm never going to compete with you like that."

She took his hands in hers. "But I think I've got a few things going for me here. You need someone who's got enough blind faith in you to follow you anywhere. You'll probably end up needing someone to help you get out of trouble sometimes, or maybe even into trouble."

Hiccup smiled. "You've seen how most of my ideas work out. Burnt buildingsâ€¦"

Astrid shook him lightly. "Okay. There's a few that have issues. But the ones that work out areâ€¦ something amazing. And that's what I'll wait for. Because they'll come, won't they? I know they will."

Hiccup squeezed her hands. "Astridâ€¦"

"Quiet. I can be that person. Because when you look at me and say my name in that voice I will fight to my last breath to hear it."

She smiled. "And if you think I'm pretty I'll just have to tolerate that. It'll be rough, I know, but I'm strong enough to bear it."

Hiccup stared straight into her eyes. "A-Astrid, that sounds scarily close to a pro-proposal."

Astrid blinked. "Wellâ€¦ Iâ€¦ maybe I _am_. Would you mind?"

She reached up and grabbed his tunic. She brought herself close. She kissed him.

Hiccup's hands were slightly shaking as he put them on her shoulders and pulled her tighter.

She finally leaned back straight. "See? It really _does_ get better if you help."

About that moment the door opened.

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As the last light faded from the Sky, Johann tightened the mooring rope at the port of the Bog-Burglars. A few people still out helped him secure the trading ship. He went up to one of them.

"Excuse me, kind sir. I have an important missive from the Chief of Berk for your Mistress Bertha."

"What's that?"

"What's what?"

"This _missive_ thing. Do we need a lot of people to carry it back?"

"Oh, no! It's an important letter for your Chief."

"_Well_, why didn't you say so in the first place, then?"

Johann sighed. "_Here_. Please see your Chief gets it straight away. It's about the dragons."

"Goin' that bad for them, huh? They should know better than to come beggin' here. We got our own problems."

Johann smiled. "Oh, I think your Chief will be quite surprised by the news. Please hurry."

The man walked away muttering about "_that fancy furrin' talk_", but Johann noticed he did move very quickly.

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Frigg pattered around the table, making sure everything was in place. Of course, there were people who did this for the house, and did it perfectly, but she wanted something to do while she thought.

Sif walked in. "I'm early, it seems."

Frigg walked over and hugged her. "No, I just wanted to ask how everything went."

Sif shrugged. "Sorry, but I didn't find her today. Her friend will make sure she's there tomorrow."

Frigg frowned. "Friend? We can't have too many involved here. We're in danger of breaking the law as it is."

Sif cocked her head. "Don't we get someâ€¦ special consideration, or something? You are Odin's wife."

Frigg shook her head. "My husband follows the laws closely himself. He really doesn't allow much leeway. That's why we have to be--"

She stopped at a nudge from Sif. Odin and Thor, with his father's arm over a shoulder, walked in laughing.

Sif sniffed. "Forget about something?" she said in a stern voice.

Thor walked over to her. "It wasn't my fault. Father left an important message at the bridge."

Sif wrapped her arms around her husband's waist. "You'll just have to make it up to me, then."

When their kissing led to them groping each other, Odin cleared his throat. "I believe you'll have plenty of time for that later, you two. Your mother is here."

Thor came up for air. "Sorry, but I have been gone."

"A week."

"Almost two."

"Sit down, you two."

Sif pouted. "The honeymoon is over, then. A few measly centuries, and you run off before saying hello to your wife."

Odin sat down at one end of the table, and Frigg the other. Sif sat on the right of her mother-in-law, while Thor sat so he and his father could continue his account of the campaign on Vanaheim.

Elves of Alfheim had attempted a foothold on that world, which included 'taking care' of the local population. Thor was worried that the sudden expansion could signal another Great War.

Odin was worried, but not the same way as in his father's time. The population of most people and creatures had been decimated in the War of the Nine Realms. But the one problem is that the Elves seemed to be able to breed at will. And they had a lot of will.

"But we will set aside these problems tonight, my son." He watched Freya enter, and he waved her to a seat. She sat on the left of Frigg.

As she sat down, people began serving. Freya looked around. "Loki missing again? He does love to shirk his responsibilities, doesn't he?"

Frigg smiled. "Oh, he'll be here. He's just doing a little favor for me. So, Freya— how's business?"

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Ruffnut closed the door behind her, taking in the two. Hiccup in the chair, Astrid kneeling in front of him. Toothless off by the fire, watching. Holding hands. "Cozy."

Astrid was just about to give Ruffnut a piece of her mind for barging in, but noticed the twin had a strange, serious look on her face. And she was staring at Astrid oddly. "Well?"

Ruffnut started walking towards them. Her shoulder hit a support column as she passed by it. She stopped and stared at it, swaying slightly.

Hiccup looked at her. "Have you been drinking?" The younger ones have been known to have a mug or two, but usually of the lighter stuff. They were Vikings, so drinking was pretty much expected.

Ruffnut turned her attention from the column back to them. "Maybe. But not nearly as much as I'm gonna be." She walked the remaining distance. She then sat on the edge of Hiccup's bed, still in the center of the room. She patted the frame. "Hmmm. _Convenient_, wouldn't you say?"

Astrid blushed. Hiccup, as usual, didn't get it.

Hiccup was just about to say something when Ruffnut snapped her head up.

"You missed a great show, Hiccup. Your father was swallowing a lot of pride back there. He really messed up, didn't he?"

Hiccup frowned. Astrid was trying to make sense of the girl's rambling. "What happened?" she asked.

Ruffnut leaned over and looked at Astrid. "_Witnesses_. Too many. Had to 'pologize. Whole village."

Hiccup was figuring something out. "Ruff—"

The tipsy twin looked at him. "You're brave. And so _cute_." She looked at Astrid. "Why does he want the mean one? Tell me, sweetie."

Astrid snarled. "Now look here, you—"

Ruffnut pointed a finger. "_No_! _You_ look here." She sat up—almost—straight. "You didn't get it, either." She tapped a finger against her temple. "Not smart like _Ruff_. No. All the men. Drinking. Talking. Spitelout. Stoick. Elders. _Alllllll_ drinking."

Hiccup started getting worried. "Ruff, could this wait— like a few _years_ or so?"

Astrid looked in Hiccup's face at that. He looked scared.

Ruffnut looked at him, giving an exaggerated nod. "Chief's son. Bet he knows tribe laws."

Astrid was still looking at Hiccup. _He knows something_.

Ruffnut went on. "Stoick disowned him. Said he wasn't a _Viking_. People _heard_. Said he wasn't his _son_."

Astrid's faced snapped towards Ruffnut, eyes wide.

"Poor Hiccup. Not even Outcast." Ruffnut made a pout. "Stoick did a _bad_ thing. All kinds of dishonor on his family. Dishonor on _tribe_. _Chief's_ son." She snickered. "Even _Snotlout_. Everybody lose honor."

Astrid gasped. She looked to Hiccup. His face was looking at his hands, fallen to his lap. Astrid sank back down, sitting on the floor.

Ruffnut slid off the bed carefully. Using Hiccup's good leg as a brace, she knelt by his other side. She reached out and took one of his hands.

"Only _one_ way to get all that back. _One_ way to give all that honor back to the tribe. Give it back to _Stoick_."

In an oddly tender moment, she pulled Hiccup's hand towards her, and lightly kissed the back of it. "You had to _die_."

She looked directly into Astrid's shocked face, tears running from her eyes. "No matter _what_. Win. Lose. Wasn't coming _back_."

Ruffnut lightly stroked the back of his hand. "Now he's most brave warrior ever. _Big_ status. And nobody knows what to do with him."

Ruffnut slowly released Hiccup's hand as she slid into a heap on the floor, out cold.

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"Come in!"

The man walked in Chief Bertha's house. The Chief and her daughter were at the table, eating. He bowed his head.

"Sorry, Chief, but Johann just pulled in. He said this letter was important." He approached her, and held out the letter.

Bertha put down her spoon and took it. "Hang on a minute. Might need an answer." She wiped her hand on a cloth and untied the string from the roll. She started reading.

Her daughter Camicazi stared at her. Bertha was totally frozen, her mouth slowly drooping as she read. After a few minutes, she thumbed through the other pages, then went back to the first one. She read it again.

Her head snapped up. "Tell Johann I need to see him as soon as he can

get here."

The man nodded and left. Bertha was staring at the letter. The she shook her head, her hand dropping to the table.

"What is it, mom?" Camicazi was concerned. Only war or famine had _this_ kind of effect on Bertha.

Bertha looked at the girl. "Tell me, when was the last dragon raid?"

Camicazi thought. They had been talking about it in the village. "Over two weeks. We usually would have had another by now. But we haven't. They get worse in winter."

Bertha nodded and waved the papers. "That's the only reason I don't just throw this in the fire as the raving of a madman." She handed the letter over to her daughter. Camicazi noticed the hand moving closer was shaking slightly.

She read it. And again. Then she slammed it down on the table.

She looked at her mother with a confused frown. "Is this some kind of a _joke_?" She slapped the letter with a hand. "You can't put the words _Hiccup_ and _dragon_ in the same sentence, unless you put in _killed by_. This doesn't make sense! How couldâ€¦| _Hiccup_ get a _Night Fury_?"

Both heads quickly turned to the knock at the door. "_COME IN!"_ They yelled in unison.

Johann slowly entered, and closed the door, leaning his back against it. He took one look at their faces and knew. "Ah, I see you've read it."

Bertha waved him closer. "The _truth_, Johann." She pointed to the papers. "Is this for real?"

Johan frowned. "I haven't read it, Chief Bertha. But if it contains anything about dragons, or Berkâ€¦| _living_ with the creaturesâ€¦| then it is true. I have seen _children_ riding them through the sky myself."

"What about this battle with a _giant_ dragon?"

"I have seen scales almost as big as a shield, and a mounted tooth as tall as myself."

"And the Chief's _son_. He really did this?"

"Yes. Stoick waxed most eloquently about his son's part in this."

"Huh?"

"Um, he told me all about it. And not only him. It seems most of the tribe was there at the time."

Camicazi shot back. "And _Hiccup_ killed it? Riding on a _Night Fury_?"

Johann nodded. "Yes, Miss. I have seen his black demon with my own eyes. But it is not all good news. It seems the boy lost a leg in the affair with the Queen."

Camicazi jumped to her feet. "Hiccup had an _affair_?"

Bertha stood up. "With a _Queen_?"

Johann put up his hands. "No, _no_. Hiccup lost a leg in the battle with the Queen _dragon_, which some are now calling the Red Death."

Bertha sat down in a huff. "Why can't you speak proper Norse?"

Johann sniffed. "I _was_ speaking proper Norse, Madam."

Bertha gave him a glare. "You just remember who you're talking to, now."

Johann smiled. "Oh, I _shall_."

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Freya put down her spoon and looked at Frigg. "How long must we put up with this?" Across from her, Sif was moving around, posing, and making faces at her husband at the other side of the table.

Frigg smiled. "Put up with what, dear?"

"That!" Freya leaned forward towards Sif. "If you open up that gown any more, they'll fall in your soup." She hissed.

Sif pouted. "I missed him. He's been away."

"A _week_!" Freya said in a tense whisper.

"Almost two!" came from the other end of the table.

Sif smiled. "See, he _was_ paying attention."

Freya slumped back in her chair.

Sif looked at her. "You're always so _tense_, Freya. You should get yourself a _man_. When I get upset, we just--"

"I don't _care_ what you do! And I'm _not_ tense!" Freya crossed her arms over her chest. "May I leave now?" she asked Frigg.

"Not yet, dear. There's someone you should meet."

Freya rolled her eyes. "Another war hero?"

Frigg smiled. "Not really. Loki'sâ€| _girlfriend_â€| if you would put it that way."

That got everyone's attention.

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Hiccup and Astrid both stared at the crumpled, confused girl on the floor. The seconds felt like an eternity to Hiccup. He was afraid to move, to speak, even to _breathe_. Because he knew what would happen.

"Is it true? What she said?" Astrid could barely whisper.

Hiccup rubbed the back of his head, still not looking at her. "Ahhhhâ€¦| _some_ of it. Maybe."

Hiccup felt himself jerked around to face Astrid. Her hands were clenched in his tunic at the shoulders.

"_Some_ of it! _What part?_" she snarled.

Hiccup looked into her eyes. _No, not there_. He tried her mouth, slightly open and panting. _Not there either_. The nose. _Better_. Her nose won't betray him. Not even the cute way her nostrils flared when she was angry. _No nose, then_. He looked at her heaving chest. _Oops_. He looked up at the ceiling. The nice, safe ceiling that he didn't love.

"That's a well built ceiling. Sturdy, don't you think?" he muttered.

The world moved around a bit as Astrid shook him. "_Damn_ _you_, Hiccup! Look at me and _tell_ me!"

He sighed. He looked into her eyes. Tears were leaking out of one, and he reached out and rubbed them with a thumb. "It wouldn't have been so bad. Everything would have been set right again. Nobody would have missed me. Think about it. I mean _really_ think about it."

Her face collapsed. The night before the final exam, even _she_ had tried to beat information out of him. He was merely an obstacle to her being the best. She had ignored him, while he had admired her. She had thought him beneath her, while he had put her on a level with a Goddess. It wasn't worth her time to think about him, while he thought of nothing else but her. And most of the tribe had been worse.

"I can't do it." She whispered.

"What?"

"I can't even _pretend_ to deserve you any more."

She pulled herself into him and buried her face in his chest. "What can I possibly do to prove myself? You'd die to give your family back its honor even while they threw you out."

"But I _didn't_ die, Astrid."

She sat up. She looked into his eyes. "Why not?"

His eyes shifted around. "Well, Iâ€¦| ummmâ€¦| "

She sniffed back a runny nose. She stared. "It wasn't _me_, was it?"

He rubbed his forehead from the growing headache. "Wellâ€¦ I couldn't justâ€¦ I mean, he shouldn't have to die for my mistakes."

"He." Then her eyes got wide. "He!" Her voice got stronger. "You only lived because of that dragon?" Her head snapped around to look at the resting Night Fury. Toothless blinked at her.

She looked back at Hiccup. He frowned. "He was my only friend, Astrid. He would kill to protect me." Hiccup looked down. "And he would have died with meâ€¦ for me. I couldn't ask that of anyone."

He shrugged. "And now I have to hope dad gets everything fixed."

Astrid narrowed her gaze. "Ruffnut says you must know the law. Fixed, or what?"

He shrugged and tried a small smile. "Most likely nothing more than Outlawed. Probably not Banishment. Nothing to worry about, see? I'll get to keep my remaining limbs."

She grabbed him around the chest and pressed herself against him again. "They can't be that stupid. They just can't!"

Then the door opened again.

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Big-Boobied Bertha yawned. It was late.

They had pressed Johann for any detail they thought might be important. They had shown him the letter, which he handed back with a smile on his face.

There would be no immediate answer. The still waters outside Berk were freezing even as he left. Only the open current would get him home, and he would leave tomorrow, after a short trade session.

She would publish the instructions that she got. It sounded like common sense.

She shook her head. Camicazi and Bertha had discussed the changes that could take place now. Without the losses of the raids, they would grow stronger.

But not as strong as Berk, it seems. Berk had always been the strongest, the most respected of the tribes. Bertha, while sorry for them, had seen the worsening situation of Berk as her chance to grab power as the most powerful Chief. When the annual Chief's meeting happened, many would defer to Stoick's opinion. She wanted that power. And now, they apparently had dragons. Berk would gather even more respect.

She had sent the tired Camicazi off to bed, with the promise they would discuss it first thing in the morning.

She tapped a finger on the table. Something nibbled at her brain. Something from years ago. She thought a while.

Then she went to her bedroom. There were several chests in there. In one was where she kept all papers and letters that she thought would have some meaning, or personal notes she wanted saved.

She opened the chest, and looked at the oldest stack of papers. _How long ago was it? Four years? Three? _She thumbed through the stack of old letters.

There it is!

She skimmed past the introduction, wordy as Stoick always was.

Aha!

"_And, I suggest, dear Bertha, that in order to forge a stronger alliance between our tribes, that we-_"_

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11. For Better For Worse

****For Better, For Worse.****

Stoick looked slow, but his mind was quick. He looked at the Thorston girl curled on the floor. His son, with his arms around the Hofferson girl. Astrid looked towards him, and he saw the streaks on her face. He cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Well, now. Iâ€™ suppose someone had betterâ€™ get this one home." He pointed to Ruffnut. He went over and gently picked her up. "She was there for the meeting, so I guess you two got an earful." He winked at Astrid. "But she wasn't there for the big finish. Now you two say your goodnight while I get her home."

As he opened the door, he looked back. "No hurry. Take your time." He left.

Astrid wiped her face with the palm of her hand. "Now what? And why did he _wink_ at me?"

Hiccup had a thoughtful look. "I don't know. But I know _dad_. I don't think its _all_ bad news." He didn't have _the_ look.

Astrid looked up at him. "Do you want me to wait? I've got to know."

Hiccup pulled her back to him. "No. But there's no rush." He smelled her hair. "For some strange reason, things have been working out for me lately. I thought I was good for nothing except being the butt of Loki's jokes, but maybe there's hope for me yet."

Astrid spoke to his chest, her arms tight around him again. "Just stop trying to get killed. _Honorably_ or otherwise. Promise me." She leaned back and hit him in the shoulder. "_Promise_ me, Hiccup!"

He gave a strange, crooked smile while rubbing the sore spot.. She

was just becoming aware of the power his eyes could hold. "As long as _you_ want me around, I'll _have_ to stay. Just to see what's going to happen next."

As she hugged him again, she remembered Loki's words that night.

You should know by now, the person Hiccup needs the most protection from is himself!

Was that a prophesy too?

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Stoick dropped off the Thorston girl at her home. He had a short talk with the mother, assuring her that _this_ _time_, she had caused no great trouble, and was only concerned for her friends. He also told her of his respect for those that rode dragons in the great battle, and suggested there be no punishment for her actions. Finally he bade her good night.

He then walked towards the Hofferson house. He saw light through the windows, so he went up and knocked on the door.

It opened to reveal Vigdis. She looked at the Chief, and her eyes went wide. "Is this about Astrid? Is there trouble?"

Stoick raised a hand. "No, there's no problem. Everyone is fine. The young ones, they have a lot to discuss. She will be home shortly." Then he gave a smile. "Could you please tell Augst I would like a talk with him, if it is not too late."

Her eyes narrowed. "Come in then, Chief. I was just goingâ€¦ forâ€¦ a quick walk before bed. The two of you can talk men things _alone_."

He came into the room, and she grabbed a cloak off a hook by the door and slipped outside quickly. Slinging the cloak around her shoulders, she smiled.

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"His _what_?"

Thor slammed a hand on the table. "The sly _devil_! Didn't think he had it in him."

Freya's eye narrowed as she looked at Frigg. "_Seriously_? He's had more women than Thor's had tankards of ale."

Frigg shrugged. "Not lately."

Sif snorted at Freya's confusion. "Like a hundred years!"

Freya frowned. Loki was a tricky one. She liked keeping up with what he was doing. She always was looking for the chance toâ€¦ _guarantee_ his help. Something like this could _never_ get past her. And why would _Frigg_ tell her? Those two were too close.

Odin stood up. "And speaking of the devilâ€¦"

Loki entered the room. He was dressed in his most formal attire for this. He was slightly nervous.

And on his arm was a vision of loveliness. The long, flowing, silver gown reflected the lanterns of the room in the guise of a thousand tiny stars. The jewels in her hair sent rainbows of color sliding around the room with every small movement of her head. Her black hair shone, and lay straight down her back.

They walked slowly towards the table as everyone, except Freya, stood to receive the new guests.

"Sorry we're late." Loki explained. "You know how long it takes a woman to get ready."

Frigg walked over and took Thessa's arm, pulling her away. With a concerned glance at Loki, she allowed herself to be led to the table. "How aboutâ€¦ no, that won't do. In that gown, I don't want you within arm's reach of Thor." She sat Thessa next to Sif. She waved Loki over to a place beside Freya and returned to her seat.

She looked around the table. "Now everyone, I'd like you to meet Thessa Haasdottr. Loki has been keeping her to himself far too long, and I'm sure we'll all get to know her better now."

"Do you have a sister?" Thor asked.

"Shut it, you!" Sif shot back.

"Well, if you're still mad at meâ€¦" Thor winked at his wife.

Sif leaned towards Thessa. "When you see him on his fourth tankard, run for the hills. You'll end up with paw prints all over that dress."

Sif saw the worry in the other woman's eyes. She reached out and took Thessa's hand. "It's okay. Really. Mom says you need a night out."

Frigg smiled at her. "Freya was afraid we were just going to have another hero here tonight. Some of those war stories do get a bit boring, don't you think?"

Thessa conquered her fear enough to give a slight nod. Her eyes kept darting quick glances at Freya across the table.

Who was frowning slightly. I've seen that face before. But Loki never keeps a woman beyond one night.

Frigg signaled, and they were served.

There was silence for a while, as Frigg had laid out more of the exotic foods of the realms than usual. Various wines were available, and Loki chose one from Alfheim. As nasty as those elves could be, they made great wine. Hard to get lately, due to the circumstances.

Frigg pointed a two-tined fork towards Loki. "So, dear, when do we hear about the wedding?"

Several things happened at once. There was a _gasp_ from everyone else, added to Loki dribbling wine down his face as he fought to hold what he had drunk in his mouth.

He put the goblet down, which was shaking visibly, as he reached for one of the small cloths on the table. Wiping his chin, he had to clear his throat several times.

"_Wedding_, mother? Whatâ€| why would youâ€| "

Frigg laughed. "I haven't seen you so red since you gave Thor's hammer away."

"_That was you?_" Thor snarled. "Why, I'llâ€|"

Frigg waved him down. "Now, _Thor_. It was all in fun, and something good did come of it, didn't it?"

Thor sat back. "I _knew_ it was him all along." He looked at Odin. "I really _did_."

Loki looked over at Thessa. "Well, we haven't reallyâ€| discussed itâ€| yet." Thessa's eyes were the size of plates, her goblet frozen in front of her face.

Frigg smiled at him. "Wouldn't that make everything easier?"

Loki frowned. "Easier? Whatâ€| easier?"

Frigg waved towards Thessa. "Why the traveling! It's not easy getting between here and Valhalla for her. I'm certain it would be much simpler for her to stay here with you."

Freya's eyes narrowed to small slits. _She was a dead mortal! Aha! Now I have him!_

Odin was paying attention a little more than usual to Frigg. He knew many accused her of mused ramblings, but he knew her too well. Her mind was as sharp as any blade, and she said nothing without a purpose. This was being played out specifically for someone. He glanced around the table. _But who?_

Frigg went on. "I guess that by now you've got all those little problems couples have worked out."

Thessa sat down her goblet, temper overcoming her fear. "If you don't count his _abandoning_ me in that Gods-forsaken city. He _still_ hasn't properly paid for it yet."

"Oh, he still didn't explain that?"

"Explain what?"

"She wouldn't listen, mother."

"I can listen fine! _Ohhhh_, you were so _attentive_! Soâ€| _caring_! But when I come up _pregnant_, you justâ€|" She shut her mouth. She had gone _too_ far. She grabbed her goblet and took a long drink of wine.

Freya froze. So did everybody else. Even Sif had not known _this_ juicy detail.

Sif looked down and toyed with her food. "Sooooo, you and Loki spentâ€| quite a bit of time together?"

Thessa sat holding her goblet with both hands, trying to control her shaking. "Yâ€|yes. About twelve years."

Sif sighed. "Long enough, then."

"Long enoughâ€| for _what_?"

"For the law of appearance to take effect."

"I've _tried_ to explain-"

"Explain _what_? You've given me this load of-"

"It wasn't _my_ choice!"

"_ENOUGH!_"

Frigg cleared her throat after that shout. "Loki, maybe she'll get the idea now." She turned towards Thessa. "Our time on Midgard is limited, dear. One of our great Laws is that we don't stay on any realm too long. Assgardians used to try and create their own empires in the old days." She shrugged. "Living many thousands of years gave one a great advantage. We're not allowed to remain once we're noticed to be staying young. And then we can't go back until everyone alive at that time is dead."

Thessa looked at Loki. He had a sad look. He took a deep breath.

"It's not that I wanted to ever leave. But when you showed those grey hairs, and the lines around your eyes, I knew I would be forced to return here. I was very happy there with you."

Thessa felt a twinge of grief. "So you didn't just get up and leave in the night."

"Every time I try to explain it all, you just try to kill me. So I gave up."

"_Pregnant_." Freya said.

Thessa nodded. "I had a boy. My cousin was keeping him while I took a ship to the place I heard him talking about. Well, when he was pretending to be a _merchant_, that is." She shivered. "I was killed during an attack by rogue Legionnaires who had stolen a galley." Then she smiled. "But I took quite a few of them with me."

Sif said; "And that's how you got here!"

Thessa nodded. "I was here for fifty years before I saw Loki again, and then I realized who he was."

Loki smiled. "And I've been paying for it ever since."

"But you didn't abandon me by _choice_."

"Never."

"_That's not the point!_" Freya practically shouted. She turned and pointed at Loki. "You had a child with _her_. _There_!" Then she calmed. "Our blood canâ€| canâ€| cause problems there. This should not have been allowed."

Frigg stopped the bite of food halfway to her mouth. "Oh, _nonsense_! Besides, I think their children would be beautiful. Even grandchildren. Just think about itâ€| Loki's good looksâ€| his charmâ€| his _hair_. And then I look at her beautiful green eyes. Did you notice those _eyes_, Freya?" She popped the food into her mouth.

Freya opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She stared at Thessa's face. Then Freya's eyebrows jumped higher than thought possible.

She stood up so quickly her chair fell behind her. "I've had enough of this. I must leave now." She stormed from the hall.

Loki was in total shock as Freya primly wiped her mouth. She smiled around the table. "I'm sorry for all the upset. But now it's just us family. More wine, dear?" She said to Loki.

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Hiccup was quite enjoying this. Her arms around him. His nose in her hair. For a while, there was nothing but quiet breathing.

He finally tried to stand up, pushing off of the chair, still holding her. It didn't work, so he put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her back. "Better head home. We can talk tomorrow."

She stood and pulled him up by the arms. "We never _did_ get that leg rested."

He started for the door, her holding his arm. "I'm going straight to sleepâ€| or _try_, anyway."

At the door, he stopped. He wasn't sure what to say or do here.

She pulled him around and kissed him lightly. "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow." He replied, as he closed the door behind her.

Astrid walked to her house, lost in thought. She couldn't exactly get what Ruffnut was talking about. Hiccup had just performed the most heroic act ever accomplished by a Viking. Or anyone else she had heard of. The thought of _punishment_ for it didn't make sense. And Stoickâ€| his attitude didn't _say_ punishment.

This was going to be a long night.

She saw someone walking around near her house. As she got closer, she picked out details.

"Mom?"

Vigdis walked up to her. "Just getting some air. Augst is talking to Stoick right now."

Astrid froze. "Good talk or bad talk?"

Vigdis smiled. "Good, I think."

"Mom? Were you at the meeting? Was there really an argument about him?"

Vigdis shook her head. "No, I wasn't. But Augst didn't say anything about it. He'd just sat down for a bite when Stoick knocked."

They were just standing there when there was the slam of a door. Stoick walked past them. "Evenin' ladies." He said as he walked by. They watched him walk quickly to his house and enter.

Astrid whispered. "Was that a normal slam or a mad slam?"

Vigdis frowned. "I don't know. Let's get home."

When they went in, Augst had already gone to their room. Vigdis shuffled Astrid upstairs to bed. She was assured to get all the news in the morning.

Astrid dressed for bed wondering exactly how she was supposed to sleep after today. Hiccup punished? Stoick and Augst talking? Ruffnut's rambling?

She lay down and pulled the blankets up with her mind swirling in a hundred directions. She knew thingsâ€¦ important thingsâ€¦ that nobody else on Midgard knew. And she had a personal task assigned by no less than Loki himself.

But how did she feel about all this? Loki seemed to feel she wouldn't mind watching Hiccup. Did she? She needed more time. But just like that night on the beach, time wasn't plentiful enough. The night before the final exam, she had decided that he was worth knowing better. When Stoick had led everyone to Dragon Island, she had pushed Hiccup to voice his feelings and do something.

Then she started putting other facts together. Hiccup didn't know she was gathering the others when he went to the arena. If she had been later, he would have flown off on the Monstrous Nightmare alone, to do the best he could. The others wouldn't have figured out everything in time to help. Without Toothless, he wouldn't have had much of a chance against the Red Death. She had eaten dragons that displeased her.

Great. So now, she had a boyfriendâ€¦ Did I just think that?â€¦ with a death wish. Somehow, the timid rabbit had become the wolf. When he lost his fear, he lost all of it.

She also had to worry about other things. For all her courage, all her trainingâ€¦ was she strong enough to do what she needed to?

And how about the more personal side of that? What kind of a pair

would they make? Just what did he inherit fromâ€| his famous ancestor?

Slowly, perhaps from pure mental exhaustion, she drifted off.

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Stoick walked back in his house. Hiccup was sprawled on his bed. He had a drained look on his face. It was only the first day of his new life. Stoick had sworn to make it easier for his son, now that he was beginning to understand the boy's mind. He had to be careful how he pushed. Now, instead of trying to force him into being something he wasn't, he must learn how to guide him in what he was. He must find the strengths that his son had, and channel them into what was best for him, and his people.

He pulled a blanket up over Hiccup. His beast had kept the fire high. The dragon's back was to him, but Stoick did not doubt that he knew the Chief was there. He had this last week learned that the Night Fury missed nothing that concerned Hiccup.

He went to bed quietly. He would tell Hiccup about his trial later.

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Loki was still sitting there in shock as Frigg began making small talk with Sif. Odin was silent, since he thought that surely, there was more to come. Thor drained another mug, and waved for a refill.

Loki slowly turned his head. "Mother."

Frigg looked back. "Yes, dear?"

"You told her everything."

"Yes, dear."

"Everything!"

"Don't get excited, dear."

"I don't have the power to stop her now. I've hidden everything under what magics work against her for all this time, and youâ€| justâ€|"

"But Loki, I only brought you here so we could fix it."

Loki was slightly shaking as he turned in his chair to face his mother. "And how can I fix it now? Secrecy was my protection. It wasâ€| her onlyâ€|"

"Oh, enough of that." Said Frigg. Standing up, she walked around the table and held out a hand to Thessa. "Come with me, dear."

Thessa let herself be led around the table until they were beside Loki, who stood up also.

Frigg adjusted them until they were standing side by side. "Now, I'm not sure how all this works, exactly. I don't think we've had such a thing here. But I've checked, and there's no law against it."

She turned to Odin, beckoning him with a hand. "If we could just borrow you a minute, darling."

Odin was fighting the smile he felt as he walked over there. "You could have said something, you know."

Frigg waved a hand. "Oh, come now. Aren't you the all-knowing? I never get to have any fun."

She turned to the two confused people standing in front of her. "Okay, now. We don't have all that mortal ceremony, Thessa, so I'll just get to the point. My husband here is going to marry you."

Loki jerked badly. Thessa looked at him. "Now you're getting cold feet."

"No! no. It's just! Oh, go ahead."

Odin walked over to stand in front of them. He simply laid a hand on each of their heads. He bowed his head for a second, then straightened up. He walked back to his seat and called for more wine.

Thessa blinked. Then she looked at Frigg, standing there with a huge smile on her face. "That's it?"

Loki was still frustrated. "And how does this help her, mother?"

Frigg laughed. "Loki, you can be so slow sometimes. I checked all the laws, and there's nothing said against an Aasgardian marrying a hero from Valhalla." She walked up and put her hands on Loki's shoulders. "And by the way, a binding between you gives her all the rights of an Aasgardian, including protection."

Frigg went on. "It's all very confusing, dear. But the binding carries until death. Oh, wait! she's already dead once. Odin dear, how does that work again?"

Odin shrugged. "Beats me. We've never done such a thing before. Your guess is as good as mine."

Loki's eyebrows furrowed as he began to grasp the meaning. "Then Freya can't!"

Frigg shook him lightly. "She can't touch her without Odin's personal permission. She's family now!" She walked back around to her seat at the table. "Really, son, you should really try the simple approach sometimes. Or maybe you were just that scared of marriage."

Thessa reached out and took Loki's hand. "Married. I thought there'd be more to it than that."

Loki faced her. "Actually, he could have done all that from the next room. Maybe even from Midgard. I think he just wanted to put on a

show for you."

"Well, you're going to have to tell me where I can get some more clothes from."

"Motherâ€¦"

"And why didn't you think of this long ago?"

Thor laughed as he reached for his tankard. "Starting to sound like a wife already."

"I heard that!"

"See, you are paying attention."

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Most times, Vikings started their work outside the instant the sun came up. So when Hiccup woke up and noticed light through the windows, it seemed a bit odd. Of course, they could have just left him alone due to his recent injuries.

He had dreamed about the battle again. It didn't hold the gut-wrenching fear of the real one, though. As he sat up, and dangled his legs over the side of the bed, he looked at his new metal leg. Same thing. He knew he had it, and it was just another thing to deal with. Toothless raised his head and looked at him.

It was almost as if his last five years had been spent training him for this. With no friends, he didn't expect much. With being ignored, or taunted, or insulted, or even hit, he had just filed those days away and dealt with it.

He thought he should feel angry somehow, but there was no anger. He was still amazed at being alive enough to allow it couldn't have been perfect. He really hadn't had a plan. Astrid and the others helped enough that he got the chance to do what he needed to.

Yesterday was all happy, and goodwill, and everyone was pleased he wasn't dead, but what now?

"What am I supposed to do now?" he asked the dragon.

"Well, for one, you can lay back down a minute."

Hiccup blinked at the dragon as if it had spoken. Then he looked towards the door. Berta had crept in quietly, not knowing if he was awake.

"Ohâ€¦ Hi, Berta. I wasâ€¦ justâ€¦ ummm, what brings you here?"

Berta walked over and dropped her bag by the bed. "You fool. You got up and went walking all over Berk yesterday. And, riding that dragon of yours. Don't you know these things need to heal?"

"It really isn't that-" He was interrupted by Berta putting a hand on his shoulder and shoving him hard back on the bed. Then she scooped his legs back on.

"You stay still, or I'll have your dragon sit on you. He'll do it, too. I've given the beast lots of fish this week."

"Traitor."

Toothless laughed. At least that's what Hiccup thought of the barking noise he came out with.

Berta rolled up his pants leg and started to unfasten his leg. "This was a lot easier when you didn't have any clothes on."

"Wait. You saw meâ€¦ ummmâ€¦ clothesless?

Berta laughed. "I think the word is naked, Hiccup. That's a pretty shade of pink you have there."

"Glad I wasn't awake for that, then."

Berta winked. "Oh, you were awake enough."

"I'm not going to ask."

She took off the metal leg, with its wood and leather fitting. She examined everything. Nothing leaking. The end of the stump seemed almost completely healed. There were just a few red areas where the leg wasn't used to having anything worn against it.

"Hmmm. Looks fair." She reached into her bag for some salve. "You're going to need to be careful until the skin toughens up a bit." She began rubbing the salve onto the raw areas. "I'll leave this with you. Don't forget, now."

"What about the foot?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, like when my foot hurts. Or itches."

Berta understood then. "I'm sorry, Hiccup. It usually goes away in time. There's nothing we have that can cure that. Gobber or the other veterans might can help."

She finished with the salve, and sat the jar at the end of the bed. Then she walked around to prop another pillow under Hiccup, raising him up some. Then she sat down on the edge of the bed by his side.

"How are you feeling?" she said.

"Okay. Just the foot thing."

"I mean, how are you feeling?"

"Iâ€¦ don't follow this."

Berta sighed. "Look. You've just been through a terrible battle, and you've lost a limb. Some people have bad nightmares. Some have a hard time adapting. How do you feel?"

"Oh. Okay, I guess." Hiccup looked at her raised eyebrow. "I'm really happy just to still be here! _Really_."

She smiled a little. "Is that all?"

"I'm not used to everyone talking to me all of a sudden. It's differentâ€¦ than I'm used to."

"But that's a good thing, Hiccup. You'll have to get used to being a hero now."

"Couldn't I just beâ€¦ more like Iâ€¦ was?" Hiccup tried to explain. "When I was a _nobody_, people didn't expect too much out of me. Now I'm scared they're going to want me to do all kinds ofâ€¦ I don't know. Hero things."

Hiccup raised himself higher with his hands. "I'm not that kind of a hero! I only did that because I was scared out my mind what would happen to everyone. They had _no_ idea what was out there!"

Berta reached over and pushed his hair over. "And that's what _really_ makes you a hero, Hiccup. You knew what was there, and what a danger it was. And you went _anyway_. _That's_ the difference everyone sees in you now."

She stood up and shouldered her satchel. "You've done so much for the village, Hiccup. It's a shame you had to suffer for it. Come see me anytime you have a problem. Any time."

She opened the door and started to step out. "And here comes your father. There's some big thing over at the Great Hall this morning."

12. For Richer For Poorer

****For Richer For Poorer.****

Hiccup sat back up as Stoick entered. His father walked over and sat in the large chair near the bed. He had sat there many hours the past week, waiting for his son to wake.

"Hiccup. You need to get dressedâ€¦ well, better dressed. The elders and counsel have discussed what to do about you all night. But don't worry."

Hiccup sighed. "Yeah, dad. I heard all that from Ruff last night. Could you at least tell me what I'm supposed to be guilty of?"

Stoick frowned. "It's been brought up that you broke many of the highest laws we have. Not everyone is as welcoming ofâ€¦" he waved an arm at Toothless, head up and watching. "â€¦them as others. It sounds cruel, son, but the charges have to be dealt with."

"What could they do to me?"

"_Hmmm_. Well, in my father's time, they would throw you unarmed into the arena filled with dragons." Stoick winked. "I actually tried to

have them do that."

"Oh, there's a father's care for you."

"Hiccup, what danger is a dragon to you now? You would have the whole lot dancing a jig."

Hiccup realized his father assumed he could control any dragon. "Good point, dad. But since I might still live, I'll bet that one got shot down." Still, he felt a rush of warmth from the fact that for the first time, the very first time in his life, his father had made a statement of absolute confidence in him. He would put up with a lot just for that.

This was part of his worry. Before, as Hiccup the Useless, he only screwed up for himself. That, and the occasional explosion, or burned building, or the occasional wounded innocent bystander. But now, as Hiccup the Hero, his mistakes could reach high, death-for-everyone levels. For the first time since waking up, he longed for the days of being ignored. Maybe Hiccup the Criminal wouldn't be so bad. Definitely a lot less responsibility.

Stoick was nodding. "Of course. But we'll deal with whatever they come up with, son. I've let you down for too long. We can deal with this as a family for once."

"Thanks, dad. Strangely enough, that's comforting to know."

"Well, you best be getting into some clean clothes. Can you make it up the stairs?"

"Yeah. I'll be changed in a few minutes."

Hiccup tightened his leg back on and climbed the stairs.

Stoick sat there in thought. He really didn't want to tell him the other news. They would handle one thing at a time.

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"Astrid."

A murmur. "Shut up and kiss me again."

"Astrid!"

"Whaâ€¦" Astrid opened her eyes. Oh. She was in her bed, dreaming aboutâ€¦ let's not go there right now.

Vigdis was shaking her shoulder. "Astrid. Get dressed. Stoick took Hiccup to the Great Hall."

Astrid was awake now. "Mom, please tell me it was for morning meal."

Vigdis turned to leave the room. "I wish I could. You'd best hurry."

Astrid launched out of bed and started grabbing clothes. What a

weird dream!_ But it wasn't like a regular dream. It kept running through her mind. She was with Hiccupâ€| but it wasn't _this_ Hiccup. The one in her dream was tallerâ€| olderâ€| and better looking. Was Loki playing her for a fool, or _maybe_ promising her something? Everything is so messed up, she can't tell anymore.

Still buckling her leather skirt at she clomped down the steps, she saw her mother at the door. She had stuffed a piece of cheese in some bread for her to eat as she went to find out what was going to happen. She nodded her thanks, grabbing it as she went by.

As she approached the Great Hall, she saw others going in. Toothless was pacing outside the hall. Stormfly was sitting near him. Stuffing the last of her bread in her mouth, she went in the front door.

Stoick, Spitelout, and several others of the senior veterans, who served as counsel, were sitting on the raised platform at the formal long table. The rest of the hall was filled with the women and men of the village. Many were calling out. Some voices were raised in anger, but not at Hiccup.

Hiccup was standing in a space in front of the table. He didn't look sad. In fact, it didn't look like any emotion at all. Astrid noted he looked tired. Her heart went out to him. Awake for just two days and dealing with problems that should never exist. Gobber stood beside him, hand holding Hiccup's arm. Whether holding him prisoner or giving him support, she couldn't tell.

Astrid elbowed her way through the crowd, forcefully, in some cases. She soon was at the front, just behind Hiccup.

Stoick stood and banged his hammerâ€| his war hammerâ€| on the table. The table, and most people nearby, jumped a foot in the air.

"_SILENCE_!" He shouted. "Any more noise and you'll be thrown out!" Quiet slowly crept across the room.

He started. "Now. We understand that as time passes, laws may need to change. We have decided that any law that punishes a person for consorting with dragons is _no_ _more_." Cheers from the hall.

"However. It has been said that no one is above the law. Hiccupâ€| my own _son_, stands accused by _some_ of consorting with dragons in the face of _war_ during dragon training. When this happened, it was a crime punishable by the worst means the council could come up with." There were some gasps and cries over this. Some of the old Chiefs had been very _inventive_ when it came to punishment.

Stoick looked down at his son. "Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, you stand accused of refusing to kill a dragon. Did you do this thing?"

"Yes, I did." His voices sounded so small in the big hall. Astrid wanted to go to him.

"That you shot down a dragonâ€| a Night Fury no lessâ€| and did not kill it, but also told no one."

"That's about it."

"That you not only failed to kill it, you even released it."

"Well, I just couldn't let him--"

"And that you made friends with this beast, and even flew on it."

"Yeah, that about sums it up."

"And that you knew at that time, it was a crime to do any of those things?"

"I didn't look at it that way."

"And just how did you look at it, Hiccup?" This came from Spitelout.

Hiccup looked down the council table. "The more I thought about it, it didn't look like the war was getting us anywhere. They kill us, we kill them— it just goes on and on. When I saw Toothless tied up like that, I thought for one moment— that someone should try and do something about it. I don't think I was a coward. I was standing there with a knife, and really about to be another dragon killer." He shrugged. "I just couldn't feel hate, dad. I couldn't. I'm sorry I disappointed you again."

Stoick felt for his son. He now knew that all the strange things he had done, all the strange ideas, they were something special. He was sorry to be doing this, but this had to be settled in front of everyone.

"Very well. We are prepared to pronounce your punishment."

Astrid stepped forward to stand beside Hiccup. "Wait! You can't do this!" She turned to the crowd. "Most of you wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for him! How can you let them do it?" The soft voices whispering through the crowd started getting louder.

Stoick looked at her. "Step aside, lass. This isn't about you."

Astrid grabbed Hiccup's arm, and held her head up high. "Yes, it is. Before the final exam, I flew on Toothless, too. I knew all about the nest, and I didn't tell anyone, either. So there."

Stoick banged his hammer again as the shouts started again. "I'll have no more of that!" But whispers sounded like a steady buzz in the hall.

"Astrid. Think about this, lass. Do you really want to stand accused with him? You will be bound by the same punishment he faces already. I can do nothing for you then."

Astrid swallowed. There was no turning back now. Time for her to make a decision had run out. She had to trust that someone was watching. "Chief— I go where he goes."

Hiccup looked at her with bright eyes, but a sad face. "_Please_, Astridâ€¦| _don't_â€¦| don't do anything."

She hurt for him. "Nothing doing. You can't get rid of me that easy. You've been alone too long."

Voices came from the hall. "Out of my way! _Move_, you idiot!" Augst, followed by Vigdis, elbowed their way to the front. Augst had a face red with anger, and Vigdis just looked confused and worried.

Augst raised his fist. "You can't do this, Stoick. _Oh_, yesâ€¦| I _know_ why you would punish my daughter. I just didn't think you'd be such a coward you'd have the _council_ do your dirty work for you!"

During this, Vigdis walked up and laid a hand on Astrid's shoulder. "Are you sure about this? Iâ€¦| I trust your feeling for him, but this is-

"Mom, I _can't_ let him go through this alone. He saved everyone! I don't care if I'm the _only_ one who believes in him."

Vigdis sighed and nodded. She stood behind her daughter with hands on Astrid's shoulders.

Stoick looked at Augst. "We did _not_ accuse her. She _was_ not mentioned. She did this _herself_!" He looked at Astrid. "Go home, girl. Nobody will say anything."

Astrid just shook her head.

Augst looked from one person to another. He sputtered with anger. "_Damn_ you, Stoick. Can you stop this if I agree to your terms?"

Stoick shook his head. "The punishment has been decided by the council, Augst. I cannot tell you otherwise. There is the fact that they may not want to see Astrid suffer his fate, however. I can promise no more."

Augst walked up the platform to the table. "Very well, Stoick. I will agree."

Stoick held out a piece of paper, and a quill.

Augst sneered. "Oh. And you just _happened_ to have this with you, didn't you? You gambled that my daughter would stick up for that boy of yours." He reached for the quill. "This is _blackmail_, Stoick!"

Stoick was getting angry. He grabbed Augst's hand in his meaty paw. Augst jerked back, but it had no effect against the Chief's mighty grip.

"Do not say that to me, Augst. You saw as well as everyone else. I tried to get her to be quiet."

He released the hand. Augst, mumbling, signed the paper with deliberate slowness. Putting down the quill, he gave Stoick a final

angry look, and stepped back down to stand beside his wife.

Stoick motioned, and the council members stepped to the back of the hall. People tried to listen to the mumbling and whispering among them. Finally, Stoick led the group back to the table.

Stoick raised his hands for quiet. "The council is decided! The accused, by his own admission, is guilty! And further, that Astrid Hofferson is also found guilty!"

He lowered his hands. "And the hall shall remain quiet after the sentence is announced. I _mean_ that, now!"

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Thessa held Loki's arm as they walked down the hallway to hisâ€| no, _their_â€| chambers. Partly for comfort, and partly because there had been quite a lot of drinking and talking after Freya had left.

"What now?" she asked. "We just carry on like any other married folk?"

Loki laughed. "You should know by now that nothing is ordinary around here." He patted her arm with his other hand. "I suppose now mother is going to drag you into the family business."

"Well, at least I'll have something to do. All those people here. Most of them just sit around and eat and drink, and tell stories. I wouldn't mind being busy for a change." She looked up at him. "You've kept me hidden for so long, I wouldn't mind a good fight."

"It's even boring for us, at least most of the time. Father's just trying to hold everything together. After the Great War, We had peace for more than a thousand years. It wasn't that hard to do, really. Half the realms had lost so many people, they simply couldn't keep it up any more. Several were laid totally to waste."

He sighed. "The problem is, most of the realms don't _multiply_ as fast as Midgard. Births are few and far between on Asgard, as well as most of the realms." He frowned. The one exception to that is Alfheim. Those damned elves multiply faster than insects. They're not very nice people, either."

"I've seen pictures. They're very beautiful."

Loki nodded. "That they are. The men are tall and slender, with fair faces. The women are even more beautiful. And that beauty gave them their power. They laughed and charmed their way into many places. The kept everyone at ease and free of worry and misguided right up to the moment they unleashed their armies and revealed their true purpose. And _that_ was the fact they considered no one fit to survive except them."

"But you won, obviously."

He nodded again. "Barely. Their armies darkened the land. Odin's father was ruler then, and led the campaigns to push them from the other realms. I was little more than a boy then, but anyone who could lift a weapon was there for when we finally took the war to Alfheim

itself."

Loki waved her to a bench in the hall. They sat down. He looked at her. "But on one of the worlds, after a skirmish, I discovered something _incredible_. Deep in caverns were millionsâ€¦| _thousands_ of millions of what would become our fiercest allies in the war. Our losses were so bad, I couldn't ignore them."

Thessa tilted her head. "What kind of people were they?"

Loki shook his head. "Not _people_, my darling. _Dragons_. " He got a distant look in his eyes. "I used some of our most powerful magics to create the Queensâ€¦| great, powerful beasts who could control all the lesser ones. Then I brought them allâ€¦| _every_ _single_ _one_ of themâ€¦| to Alfheim. There were so many the entire sky was dark with them. We unleashed them on the great elf army and the battle lasted for _months_."

He stared at a spot in the marble pattern across the hallway. "Somewhere during that battle, I began to feel sorry for them. Under the Queens, they blindly attacked anything, regardless of pain, and completely uncaring of their lives. They fell like rain from ranks of elven archers and war machines. And kept going."

He leaned his head back against the wall. "They won the war for us, but only a handful remained. I watched men who laughed and joked during the battle that _men_ would never have to fight again. It made meâ€¦| a bit angry at _myself_."

Loki closed his eyes. "I discovered they have _feelings_, Thessa. I saw dragons cry over dead mates, and dead friends. I saw dragons _beg_ to be released from their pain. I was ashamed."

He smiled. "I did the thing that helped earn me the title I have today. I stole those few that were left alive, and brought them to Midgard. I scattered them among the islands so they could live in quiet peace. And then I cast my most powerful magic everâ€¦| no one of Aasgard blood could approach a dragon except _me_."

Thessa started. "Isn't Odin angry about that?"

Loki shook his head. "No, I think he's the only one who understood. And most of the others don't even know. Nobody tried again. You said it yourselfâ€¦| the people eat and drink. They grew too complacent. And that is the death of a people. Odin is having problems getting them ready for another war with the elves."

Thessa frowned. "But the Vikings found them again. The dragons."

Loki nodded. "And started another war with the dragons. And I had to wait for one who would stop this."

"The _boy_!"

"That's why I have to protect him. There are rumblings from a man who would use those wonderful creatures for war again. He is currently being held back byâ€¦| _another_. But it won't last forever."

"But the boyâ€¦| _Ahhhh_! He is of Aasgard blood, yes. But also _your_

blood. _That_ is what gives him the power!"

"It's not magic. Not that kind of power. More of a _drive_. And as much as I wanted to interfere with his childhood, I had to let it build him into what he is today."

"No great magic power over dragons?"

"No. Something more subtle. He'll be a leader. Others will follow him, even if they don't understand him always. His blood will give him unusual insight. Those are the things he inherited from me."

Loki reached out and held Thessa's hand. "And he will have great stubbornness from _you_. I hope that is enough. It seems to be so far. I went too far with the Queens. One day I will have to apologize to him for that."

Thessa gave him a smirk. "I bet I know what _part_ of you will give him power over that little blond axe-maiden!"

"You do always have a different way of looking at things, don't you?"

"It is our _wedding_ night, love. What _else_ am I to think about?"

"Not too tired?"

"Have I _ever_ been?"

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

(PREVIOUS NIGHT)

Hofferson Kitchen

"Evenin' Stoick."

"Evenin'. I know it's late, but I think it's high time we spoke of something."

"Sit down, then. It's not like I haven't been expecting this. Vigdis has been hinting at it for the past week."

Stoick pulled up a chair and sat down at the table. "Then you've noticed, too."

"That my daughter's been spending most of last week waiting for that boy of yours to rise from the dead? Who wouldn't have known that?"

"Well, Dirstman the Blind, but I think he knows by now."

Augst put down his spoon. "I guess we'll have to get to the business part, now."

"Aye."

"There's the usual gifts, of course. Weapons. Tools. Things for the

women."

"Aye. No worry there. My son does good work. His weapons don't break."

"I've been needing to increase my farm holdings. Not much farmland here."

"No there isn't. And I don't have any. Never the time for the Chief's household."

"Well, there we seem to hit a snag, Stoick. Unless you have the gold or silver to make up for it. I'm getting more land."

Stoick sighed. "For years, I'd saved a nice chest of loot from my days at sea. I had thought to use it to marry off the lad to a good family." Stoick shook his head. "But the dragon raids these past years were the worst. I used what I had saved to get the village what it needed when we hadn't enough to trade anymore. There's naught left of it."

"But you've got a fine herd of yak, there."

Stoick shook his head again. "Those really aren't mine. When times were better, people gave extra to the herd. It's the Chief's herd, and belongs to the village. When times are bad, like these last few years, they make sure the less fortunate don't go hungry."

"You're not giving me much to expect, now, are you?"

Stoick felt his temper rising. But for the sake of Hiccup, he tightened up on it, choking it into submission before it shown on his face. "I'm willin' to forego his part of the dowry, Augst. Without dragon raids, we'll have plenty from now on. I can make it up to him later."

"But there's things I'm not willing to forego, Stoick. I've got the family to think of, here. And Spitelout will offer plenty to marry her to his son."

Stoick stood up, his heart heavy, and put his hands on the back of the chair. "I'm trying to think of the young ones themselves, Augst. You'll not do the same?"

"You've negotiated more arranged marriages for people than I can count, Stoick. This one's no different."

Stoick turned to leave. "It is to me. And I thought it would be to you. You've discussed this with Vigdis, I take it?"

"She doesn't run the business side, here, Stoick. I'm the head, and I made the decision."

"You'll not take any promises of the future from me?"

"That won't fill my coffers, will it?"

"Then I must bid you good night, Augst."

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(PREVIOUS NIGHT)

Hofferson Bedroom

(10 minutes later)

"You told him what?" Vigdis was having a problem keeping her voice down. Thick walls and floors, they had, but she didn't want Astrid to hear any of this. The poor darling had enough worries.

"We couldn't come to an agreement. He's too cheap."

Vigdis clenched her fists in anger. "I don't care how cheap he is!" she hissed. "The man's had enough problems just keeping us alive all these years. That's not something you put a price on."

She sat down on a stool beside the bed he was sitting on. "Why are you against this?"

Augst looked at her. "Really, I am not. I thought the boy was just a runt. I thought he would never be good enough. But after what's happened, I'll say he must have a backbone of iron." He threw his hands up. "But a good marriage for her will help us greatly. You've said this house is too small."

"I won't live in the Chief's house itself if you get it by selling our daughter to one she doesn't choose."

"Everyone arranges marriages."

"Not everyone. And you have gold."

Augst sighed. "Mulch says he's getting too old to work his garden. He's going to spend more time fishing on Bucket's boat. He doesn't have any immediate family on Berk. It's one of the few gardens that's been for sale in a generation. And he'll get quite a bit for it. The extra land will increase our money. We'll live better."

Vigdis leaned close. "Listen. I've let you run the money for us, and you've done very well. We've not gone for what we've needed. I give you all that. I run the house, and help you with the animals, and help you weed the crop, and I don't ask any questions, or make any demands."

She lowered her eyelids. "But in this, I will have a say. You will go to Stoick, and you will come to an agreement."

Now Augst was getting angry. "I have my pride, woman. I will not go crawling to Stoick and suddenly say I have changed my mind."

Vigdis gave him a predatory grin. "I don't care what you do. You will fix this. Do not make me choose between Astrid and you."

She stood up and grabbed her cloak.

"Where are you going?"

"To get some fresh air. It feels suddenly _tainted_ in here."

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(PREVIOUS NIGHT)

Haddock house

(15 minutes later)

It's probably this window.

Stoick was sitting in the single chair in his room. He had seen the two youths. He knew they had feelings for each other. He tried to do what he could.

In a way, he could not blame Augst. The recent bad years had drained the riches from Berk. It was a good land, with timber, and a small iron mine with good ore that was worked in the warmer months. It had game, and plenty of pasture land, if a bit tilted in many spots.

Things would get better, but Augst would not wait for that.

Then there was a tapping on the window. Stoick rose and opened the shutter.

"_Vigdis_? What are you doing here?"

"Hold your voice down, you fool."

"_Ahem_. Sorry."

"So you did not come to an agreement about Astrid and Hiccup." Not a question.

"It's true. We haven't been wealthy lately. I had hoped that he would care for the young ones, butâ€¦" he shrugged.

"Then we must do this. But we will need help."

Stoick leaned his elbows on the windowsill. "What kind of help?"

"You're going to have Hiccup's trial in the morning, aren't you?"

"Aye. But I'll brook no harsh punishment. There are fools being troublemakers. All know this."

"And I've heard the women, Stoick. They'll not put up with it. And they've made sure their men know it, too. And I can't see the men Hiccup and the others saved being a party to this. Now, what if weâ€¦"

She told what was really a simple thing, provided the support was there.

"_Gods_, woman! You would do such a thing to your family?"

"Only to part of it. I suspect Astrid will not mind, once she has learned what else was in store."

"Go to bed now. I'd better go wake Gobber." He started to turn, but looked back. "Wait. How sure are you about this? It all depends on one thing, doesn't it?"

Vigdis smiled. "Quite sure, Stoick. Quite sure."

13. Vacation

****Vacation.****

Camicazi came downstairs to make breakfast early, but found her mother already there. She was drinking a mug of strong tea, and looking through an incredibly thick book.

"How was your night?"

Camicazi shrugged. "Not as much sleep as I wanted." She sat down as Bertha poured her a mug. "I can't get over it. No more raids?"

Bertha nodded. "I've had some people working on the notes that came with the letter. Biggest thing, according to Berk, is that we don't attack or threaten them if theyâ€¦ visit."

"That's a tough one. A dragon meansâ€¦ I mean, _meant_, grab your swords and axes!" Camicazi sighed. "How did he do it? Hiccup. _Hiccup!_"

Bertha leaned over. "Look, you have to start thinking about this as the future Chief. Killing dragons was all about status, and _Stoick_ had more than anyone. Now this new thingâ€¦ Berk is going to get a lot of attention now."

Camicazi narrowed her eyes. Her mother always knew how to turn anything to their advantage. "And?"

Bertha smiled. "We need to get some of that power."

Camicazi didn't understand the look. "And what's your plan to do that?"

Bertha handed her a piece of paper.

Camicazi read it, frozen. Then she politely and carefully sat it down in front of her. "You're kidding." She was surprised her voice was so calm.

"Just think about itâ€¦ Chief's sonâ€¦ dragon riderâ€¦ big heroâ€¦ He'll go far, that one." Bertha clenched her fist. "And we can control all of it."

Camicazi tapped the paper with a fingertip. "You forget a lot of things there, mother." Her voice was still calm.

"Hmmm. Besides the fact you don't want to marry him?"

"I'm surprised you figured that out so fast. But I'm also going to bring up the fact that you got that offer the last time we went to Berk. That was three years ago. Stoick couldn't give that skinny boy away." She looked up at her mother. "But if we have to wait 'til spring, he won't beâ€| available any more. Stoick won't remember that letter unless you can wave it under his nose."

Camicazi did look thoughtful for a second. Hiccup had been cute, clumsy, fumble fingered around girls, cute, intelligentâ€| and did she mention cute?

She shook her head. Cute wasn't good enough. What about smart? He figured out how to train dragons! He stopped the war with them. Smart was pretty good. But...

"Besides, with all that, Berk girls are lined up for him. Stoick is probably dancing right now."

Bertha thumped the thick book beside her. "Well, the law can help us a little with that one."

Camicazi threw her hands up. "What part of 'I don't want to marry him' did you miss, mom?" Then she froze. "You're not giving up, are you? You've got some crazy scheme, and you just won't let this go. Do I have to kill him to make my point here?"

Bertha shrugged. "Look, it would be in name only." She started counting points on her fingers. "You marry him. You get all the dragon secrets. Then he has some sort ofâ€| accident. That leaves you free, and us with all the knowledge. See? You can kill him and make your point!"

Camicazi stood up. "NO! That's pathetic! I know we're not the nicest tribe, but I won't stand for that!" She started pacing. "If it was anybody else, I might go for it. But Hiccup? He's not vile, or mean, or power-mad. He's justâ€|"

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Camicazi was about to turn thirteen their last visit to Berk. Hiccup, as the Chief's son, had the job of showing her around, making sure she got where she needed to be, and generally keeping her entertained.

She wished he wouldn't stutter so much when he looked at her. She thought him rather foolish, as well as weak and hopeless. She hid from him whenever possible.

She also wanted to escape him for training. The Bog-Burglar warriors were almost exclusively women, and some of the best of her mother's tribe had been teaching her almost as soon as she could stand.

She was in a clearing in the woods near the beach. She was trying to get the hang of something Indis was trying to teach her. Indis could spin on one foot, very quickly, and throw daggers as she spun so that all would hit their target. Every time. Camicazi had begged to learn when the woman had placed fiveâ€| five daggers precisely in the center of the targets without even appearing to do more than turn

around.

Clunk.

The hard part was thinking _ahead_. The element of surprise is that the enemy wouldn't know exactly what you were doing. Move _fast_ enough, and they would never see you draw.

Clunk.

Indis had told her that the swift, lithe, easy movements she made would come to the young girl. Training, and a few years growth would fix everything.

Clunk.

It was hard to think for the future. She watched the warriors spar, and she wanted that skill _now_. She was already skilled with sword and bow, but she loved the simplicity of daggers the most. Particularly _thrown_ ones. No sense getting close enough to stab.

Wait. She stopped. Not only had that knife failed to stick, it had missed the tree entirely and spun off out the edge of the woods. Mumbling a few light curses, she stomped after it. They had been a present, and quite valuable. Plus, she liked them.

A few yards past the last tree, she found it sticking at an angle in the sand. Brushing it off on her dress, she looked down the rocky beach.

She saw Hiccup leaning against a large rock. He was staring at the docks. He had a large book open on his legs. He would look at the docks, and look down and write something. She walked up beside the rock.

"What 'cha doing?"

Hiccup started. His charcoal stick flew in the air as his head whipped around.

"Wha' Oh. Hi! Cami. Ummm. Hello there. What brings you out here?"

She plopped down beside him. "Just practicing."

"Practicing? Likeâ€¦ giving people heart attacks?"

She nudged his shoulder with hers. "No, silly. Daggers."

Hiccup nodded. "That soundsâ€¦ strangely normal for you."

She looked over. "So? What are you writing?"

"Drawing, actually. Trying to."

"Let me see."

"I really don't-"

She snatched the book out of his hands with a quick grab, and held it in front of her. She looked at what he was working on.

>"Wow."<p>

His hand, reaching for the book, stopped.

"This is good." He had captured a perfect image of one of the longboats at the end of the dock. Rolled sail, slack lines, the row of shields down the sideâ€| all in perfect detail. "When did you learn this?"

Hiccup rubbed the back of his neck, pulling on some of his unkempt hair. "I don't remember learning anything. I just started, well, doing it." He had a small smile. "I get a lot of time alone, you see. When nobody wants to be seen with you, you have to find something else to do."

"What else is in here?" She flipped back a few pages.

Hiccup made a grab. "N- no. You don'tâ€|" Too late.

It was a picture of Camicazi standing at the end of the dock. She was in the cloak she had arrived in. She was drawn in perfect detail, looking off to one side at something. She looked positively regal. Her eyes were large and bright. Her hair was loose, and blowing off to one side in the breeze, fanning out from her head. She remembered that there were a lot of people at the docks, with unloading their boat and all, but in the picture, she was standing alone. The pattern of the cloak, the ruffled dress, all in perfect detail.

"How did you do that?"

"Well, it's a question of blending. And the thickness of the char-

"No. I mean, how did you do it? You didn't have this with you at the dock."

Hiccup looked towards the docks. "Well, sometimes when I see somethingâ€|" he shrugged. "â€|special, I can remember it later."

"And that's how you see me."

She was staring at the side of his head, since he still wouldn't look at her. Finally, his head gave a small nod.

She slowly closed the book, and handed it over. He took it, still looking away.

She stood up, and started to leave. But she looked closely at him, and felt she had to say it. "Hiccup, you look at things differently than everyone else. I know what a hard time you have. I've heard about your adventures half my life. But I wonder if someday, people are going to have a hard time living up to you."

With that she left, leaving a confused Hiccup staring at her retreating form.

He was even more confused when, for the remainder of the visit, she quit avoiding him. She walked with him. She took meals sitting beside him at the head table in the Great Hall with their parents. Snotlout said he must have given her gold or something, or her mother was making her be with him. The twins made jokes about how she could do better. Astrid just looked at them with a scowl, as usual. Fishlegs was halfway friendly. She understood his life then. And he took it all, and remained silent.

A few days later, when they were getting on the boat back home, she and Hiccup laughed at Stoick and Bertha trying to give each other a hung over goodbye hug. With her mother's bust line, there wasn't enough arm to go around anything else.

Camicazi held out her hand for a goodbye clasp. At first, Hiccup stared at it like she was offering him an eel. She cleared her throat. "_Ahem_. It won't bite."

He lightly grasped her forearm like it was something delicate. His eyes were large. "See youâ€¦ soon?"

She nodded. "You need to do something about the dragon raids. There won't be much more visiting here."

And there wasn't. Berk, probably because it was closest to Helheim's Gate, caught the largest share of the dragon attacks. While they were a problem everywhere, it was more than twice as bad there. They hadn't returned since.

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â€¦nice." Camicazi remembered the last time she saw him, staring at the departing boats.

She sighed. "No killing."

Bertha smiled. "We won't unless we-"

"_No_! Whatever the plan is, there will be _no_ killing, wounding, maimingâ€¦ he doesn't even get a _blister_ out of the deal. Or I don't do it at all."

"Why the soft heart all of a sudden?"

Think fast. "Berk's been our best ally for a long time. That way sounds suspicious, even to me."

"Okay, how about a divorce? There's some women here who wouldn't mind helping out _there_. And with witnesses, even."

"Fine. _Maybe_." Camicazi looked at her mother. "But it doesn't matter, does it? He'll be betrothed before we get there, anyway. Spring is months away."

Bertha patted the book again. "There's quite a few things in the law, daughter. We haven't been back to Berk because the dragons got worse there. Too bad to make the trip. The law provides for that. If there's limited travel, the offer is valid until revoked or refused by one of the parties."

"But you never answered him, did you? Silence can be taken for refusal. The trader Johann had plenty of chances to deliver a letter."

"That's a point that might be argued later. I can claim the answer was lost at sea. I don't intend to let them get their wits about them that much. Strike fast, that's my motto."

"And if he's already betrothed?"

Bertha smiled. "That's where we can have some fun and still obey the law. We can claim the previous offer and see if they back downâ€¦ orâ€¦ you can challenge the poor girl to a duel over him! Winner takes all."

"But what if he likes her?"

"Who?"

"This girl. If they're betrothed, maybe he likes her."

"What girl?"

"It doesn't matter! If he's betrothed, there's bound to be a girl involved!"

"Who cares?"

"He might."

"You're better than anything Stoick can come up with."

"It's not Stoick I wonder about making the decision."

"What's gotten into you, girl?"

"I don't know, mother. This would be a good idea if we hadâ€¦ Hiccup's cooperation, wouldn't it?"

"Maybe, but it's not necessary. I'm a Chief, and you're my heir. Stoick can't just throw you out. Bad for business, and all that." Bertha's eyes narrowed. "Or do you really have some feelings for him? That should make this easier."

"Notâ€¦ thatâ€¦ those kind of feelings, mom. But, I do care how he feels." Camicazi looked at her mother. "Besides, if he's done half of what Johann and Stoick said, do you really want to make him angry? A man who rides a Night Fury? And commands others?"

Bertha frowned. "You've said the one thing that worries me. Stoick may not care about allies, if Hiccup commands such power." She looked at her daughter. "Look, you get your feelings right about this. He's a creature of habit, that Stoick. The betrothal announcements will be published at the end of the Thawfest. Without dragon raids, I'll bet they have a big one this year. We get there before the Thawfest and figure out what's going on. We have several options open to us."

She stood up and went to the door. "All this plotting has made me

hungry. I'm going for some food. Are you coming?"

Camicazi waved an arm. "In a bit. You go ahead."

As her mother left, Camicazi's face fell. _Just what did she want to do? Her mother had sounded soâ€| ruthless! _

She knew her mother, and her desire to gain more respect among the Chief's Gathering. Allies Berk may be, but she seemed to feel no personal gratitude for that. The way she had casually mentioned eliminating Hiccup scared her. Some of the sneakiest thieves on Midgard were warriors in this tribe. And it has been known that the occasional paid murder wasn't beyond some of them.

Her mother was making one thing clear. Hiccup must be controlled or gotten rid of.

But this time, she wasn't thinking as the Chief's daughter.

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"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Thirdâ€|" Stoick's voice softened a little. "â€|Hiccup Stoicksonâ€| Are you ready to be sentenced?"

Hiccup just nodded. Once. He had never heard himself addressed by his family name before. His father was on his side.

Stoick addressed the hall. "It is true that these were crimes when they were committed. The council also takes as fact that this same person has performed a great act for the good of the tribe, and at horrible risk. However, we feel it is proper to make an example of one who breaks the law no matter who it may be."

Stoick paused. "But when the crime, and the great deed, are one and the same, judgment is difficult. There is a line where judgment and justice must meet." He looked down at his son.

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, you are hereby banished from this tribe-"

The hall broke out in shouts of anger. Swords were drawn and axes waved. Several men started forward. Astrid's parents turned white with fear.

Stoick pounded his hammer into the table and pointed it at the angry men and women. "_SILENCE!_ You will wait for this to be finished!"

There were still many exposed blades, but the shouting lowered to a loud mumbling.

"_Ahem_. As I was saying. You are hereby banished from this tribe for a period of ten days."

Louder mumbling, but more confused this time.

"Astrid Hofferson, are you prepared to hear the judgment of the council?"

She gripped Hiccup's arm, and nodded.

"Astrid Hofferson, for confessing to helping Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third in committing these crimes, you are hereby banished from Berk for a period of five days."

He continued. "The usual method is to give the convicted a small boat, and such things as would help them survive until they would find another home. But now, we will let them choose their own manner of transportation."

Hiccup smiled slightly. That meant dragons, of course.

There was movement near the back of the hall. Mildew, and some others, were mumbling and cursing as they elbowed their way to the doors. His followers were a few distant relatives, and mainly people who owed him money. A couple of them looked guilty of a crime themselves as they sheepishly followed Mildew out of the hall.

Augst looked up at Stoick. "What kind of trick is this, Stoick?"

Stoick looked at him. "Many of us argued through the night, Augst. Very few thought he should face charges." He sighed. "But they could not be ignored. It is bad enough that he has just risen from his deathbed to face this trial. The council found it hard to condemn the same person who just saved their lives."

Augst snarled. "I would claim fraud against you, Stoick. But that would be useless now, wouldn't it? The whole council is bewitched with the boy."

"The bargain is fair, Augst. You stand to lose nothing, and gain much."

Augst waved a hand in disgust, and turned to leave the hall. He looked at Vigdis and Astrid. "When you get home," he told Vigdis, "we need to discuss this agreement of Stoick's."

He stormed out the door. One of the men looked through the door, slightly opened. The rest of the hall was strangely silent.

Hiccup looked around. There was a lot of muttering, but he couldn't pick anything out. This wasn't what normally happened at these things.

He looked over at Astrid, who was glancing here and there also. "What's going on, Hiccup?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. It's like they're waiting for so—"

"He's gone!" Said the watchman at the door.

The hall burst out in cheers. People were pounding each other on the back, and laughing.

"Did you see those faces?"

"I swear to Thor, I couldn't hold back much longer!"

"I'll go get the mead!"

"Bring twoâ€¦ no, five!"

Gobber patted Hiccup's shoulder. "Well, lad and lassie, I've got to get a few bits prepared for your, _umm_, banishment." He turned and walked out the door, whistling.

Astrid shook Hiccup's arm. "Will you tell me what is going on here?" She looked at her mother. "Mom?"

Vigdis smiled. She stepped over and gave her daughter a hug. "You were marvelous, Astrid. I'm so _proud_ of you."

Stoick stepped down from the platform. He stood in front of his son. "Well, son. I hope you've learned your lesson about flauntin' the law this time." He was smiling.

Hiccup raised an eyebrow. "You were setting someone up, weren't you? And what was that paper thatâ€¦ it _wasn't_!"

Astrid turned at that sound of fear from Hiccup. "Wasn't what?"

Hiccup waved a hand around in vague gestures. "_Dad_! Me? _Astrid_? Thatâ€¦ was aâ€¦ a-"

Stoick laughed and clapped a hand on Hiccup's shoulder, almost buckling his knees. "Well, not really, son. That was a-"

"Wait a _minute_!" Astrid looked back and forth between her mother and Stoick quickly enough to feel dizzy. Or maybe it was the realization thatâ€¦ "Mom? Is heâ€¦ did heâ€¦"

Vigdis grabbed her daughter's face in her hands to keep it still a second. "Listen to me, love. That wasn'tâ€¦ _quite_â€¦ a betrothal." She looked from Astrid to Hiccup. "Augst was going to make an agreement with Spitelout as soon as today. Everyone who knew you two wanted to help." She waved an arm at the attentive people surrounding them. "They allâ€¦ almost every person in Berk knew you two would be better off together."

Cheers and raised tankards greeted those words.

Hiccup and Astrid were looking around, amazed at the reactions they saw. Then, turning, their eyes found each other.

Astrid smiled slightly. "Well, you're stuck with me now."

Hiccup smiled back. "I know better than to try to fight you." Then he turned to his father. "Dad, if it wasn't a _betrothal_, then what was it?"

Vigdis stood beside Stoick. "We just needed some time to get what Augst wanted, dear. Augst was being _too_ greedy about this. Stoick and I wanted to give you more _time_."

Astrid blinked at that word. "So it's justâ€¦ some kind of delay?"

Stoick nodded. "It's an agreement to meet his price by next year. You cannot be betrothed to another before that. Your mother's idea."

Vigdis nodded. "I know you've no love for Snotlout, Astrid. I wanted you to have a chance to be happy. I've a much better feeling about this choice."

Hiccup noticed that Spitelout was now standing beside Vigdis. "Ummm, dad?"

Spitelout shook his head. "Don't worry, Hiccup. I've seen many things in my life, but the one thing I will never forget is the moment you flew into the mouth of that creature. It's true that I wanted my son to marry the strongest woman."

Then he sighed. "But Snotlout came to me and said he couldn't take the girl you loved. He also said he knew that Astrid had no love for him. He said the strangest things that day. He said that money couldn't buy what he wanted. The battle, and his dragon, has changed him, Hiccup. For the better, I think. For that, I couldn't help but back Stoick in this. But don't think he's getting soft. He'll still take the Thawfsst games, as usual."

He looked around. "Now, I think, would be time for one round of ale before these two criminals have to serve their sentence!" This was met with cheers all around.

Hiccup looked up at his father. "Youâ€| all theseâ€| was for me?"

Stoick rested a hand on his son's shoulder, gently this time. "Son, you've done more to help this village than you could ever know." He nodded towards Astrid, hugging Spitelout. "And she's been miserable these last days. It didn't take Vigdis and I much talking to figure things out."

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Hiccup was sitting beside Astrid at the head table. They kept sneaking glances at each other. They both wanted to talk, but this wasn't the place. They sipped their ale slowly.

Gobber entered the hall and walked up to them. "Well, 'ere ye both be, still. Yer beasts are ready and well fed fer th' trip, you two. Be careful, now." He went to get himself a mug.

Stoick leaned over the table. "Now, you two, here's the serious part. Mildew and his cronies will probably be watchin' every bit of Berk lookin' for one of you to break the sentence. You must not be on the island at all." He nodded at Astrid. "You be back here by next Thor's Day, young lady."

He turned back to Hiccup. "I worry about you bein' out there by yourself, especially after just healin'. But I'll tell you thisâ€| I wrote to Bertha, and she knows about you and your dragons. You can go to the Bog-Burglars for a few days." He sat back. "If it wasn't for winter settin' in, I wouldn't worry so much. Be careful, son."

Hiccup smiled. "Hey, you know me, dad."

"That's what's worryin' me. I _do_ know you. Trouble follows you as close as that dragon of yours. Just don't go _lookin'_ for it."

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Everybody had to remember to put on a serious face before leaving the Great Hall. Astrid and Hiccup walked over to their dragons. Gobber was standing there beside a pair of satchels. Toothless and Stormfly both sported bundles lashed to the rear of their saddles.

Gobber pointed to the packs. "Got lotsa stuff for ye in here, nowâ€¦ dried fish, some dried yak, a little dried muttonâ€¦ a skin of aleâ€¦" He rubbed his cheek. "Oh, and I made sure to pack extra flint an' steel fer ye."

Hiccup stared at him. "Gobber, we're on _dragons_. I don't think it's going to be too difficult to make fire. You knowâ€¦ _dragons_?"

Gobber smiled. "Oh. Not used to that bit, yet." He pointed to Stormfly. "There's a small tent, a fur, and a few blankets on yer beasties. Ye'll do fine, kids."

"You're not going to give me the '_stay out of trouble'_ speech?"

Gobber laughed. "You haven' paid attention to _that_ since you were knee high to a Terrible Terror. Don' think it's worth wastin' the words."

Hiccup looked over at Astrid. "Soâ€¦ where do we go?"

She thought. "I don't want to go see the Bog-Burglars yet." She closed her eyes a few seconds, and then opened them again to the sky.

The wind shifted a little. Astrid pointed. "That way."

They mounted. Hiccup looked back at his father, while Astrid waved to Vigdis. Then they turned, and took off into the noon sky.

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A red-eyed Ruffnut slowly walked up to the group. "What's going on?"

Stoick looked over. "Mornin', lass. Sleep well, did we?"

"Not so loud, please, Chief. And where are they going?"

Stoick gave the twin a quick account of the morning, ending with the temporary banishment of the two so-called criminals.

Ruffnut's headache was being pushed aside by another worry. Mumbling a goodbye to the Chief, she stumbled off towards the woods.

Sif is gonna be pissed!

14. Decisions

****Decisions.****

Toothless lazily flew just behind Stormfly, in that half-flying, half-gliding method dragons use that eats the miles and saves strength.

They had been flying for some time, and the setting sun told Hiccup they should settle down somewhere soon. He was about to draw up to Astrid and remind her when she broke to a downward angle to a relatively small island up ahead.

Hiccup nudged Toothless to follow, and the Night Fury lowered in a wide spiral, keeping an eye on the Nadder as Astrid scouted for a likely spot.

Stormfly landed at the top of a wide beach, bordered by tall trees. Toothless glided in behind her.

Hiccup slid down and walked up to where she was looking through the edge of the woods.

Astrid waved him on. "This looks good." She went through the tree line.

They came out in a clearing. They looked around.

"Not bad." Astrid commented. "Surrounded by cliffs on two sides. Almost a cave over there. We can do this."

Hiccup thought it made a fair camp. "I'll start getting some wood."

Astrid led the dragons back to the clearing while Hiccup gathered branches. When he came back with an armload, he saw there was already a medium-sized stack of wood. Putting his on top, he looked around to see Stormfly walking up, head held high, carrying several large log pieces.

"You taught her to fetch wood." He was surprised.

Astrid looked up from the pack she had removed from the Nadder's back. "Well, you were out of it for over a week. I had to have something to do." _Besides worry myself sick._

"Everybody trained their dragons to do stuff like this?"

"Right. _Sure_. Snotlout and Hookfang are still trying to find out who's boss, the twins practice blowing up stuff too much, and Fishlegs is pampering Meatlug to the point I'm expecting a betrothal announcement any day now."

"So you're saying everything's still pretty much normal." Fishlegs always did have an almost unnatural thing for dragons.

Astrid looked up. "As normal as we can be with dragons. How about getting a fire started." She began unstrapping the bundle from Toothless.

Hiccup carried or drug stones over to a rocky area, and put them in a circle. Then he placed the wood. He looked over to Toothless. "Hey Bud, care to help?" He pointed to the wood. Toothless sauntered over and blew a small purple _wuff_ into the pile. Warmth and light spread out against the darkening sky.

Hiccup sat down on a nearby rock. Astrid was finishing the second tent now, and, throwing down the hammer, brought one of the satchels over by the fire. Somewhere during Hiccup building the fire pit, someone, probably a dragon, had placed a log for sitting nearby. He massaged the area just below the knee where the wood cup joined.

She sat down, opening the pack. "How's the leg?"

Hiccup shrugged. "Okay. Not that much walking today."

"Want to talk about it?"

"My leg? _Why_?"

Astrid put down the packet of dried yak she had pulled out of the pack. "That doesn't happen every day. And youâ€¦ you'reâ€¦"

"Me?"

"That's _not_ the way I meant it."

Hiccup looked at her. She showed worry, and a bit of sadness. "Don't worry. Maybe it hasn't been long enough to sink in. I'm okay." He reached down and patted the metal. "This is just another thing to deal with."

"Don't say it like that."

"Then _how_ am I supposed to say it?"

Astrid sighed. "Like it's not just another kick in the face like the whole village has been giving you your whole life." She sat the packet down. "I don'tâ€¦ know how to evenâ€¦ say we're sorry for everything. _Words_ just don'tâ€¦ mean enough."

She smiled a bit. "Does it help to say it'll get better?"

Hiccup smiled back. "It already has. Dad tried to get me thrown into a pit of dragons."

"_What?_" Astrid's face was frozen in shock.

Hiccup laughed. He really laughed, for the first time since he met Toothless. Her face was priceless! "Let me explain!" He told her about his talk with Stoick and the punishments the old Chief's had given out.

"So you see, he _never_ did that before. _Nobody_ ever did. He had _faith_ in me, Astrid. He trusted me enough that he felt I could fix

it." Astrid noticed he sat up a bit straighter.

Could his problem this whole time just been confidence?

"Well, _could_ you have?"

"_Possibly_. Depends on the dragons."

"Your dad's a lot different now. We all are." She patted the log.
"Plenty of room here near the fire."

Hiccup walked over and sat down on the other side of her than the spot she picked, putting the pack between them. Astrid noticed this.

"I won't bite."

"I'm not so sure after this morning. And that axe is pretty close."

Astrid sat up straight, hands on her knees, staring at the fire.
"Okay, let's talk about _that_. We need to."

"Astridâ€¦ Iâ€¦ I didn't have _anything_ to do with that. Dad and yourâ€¦ mom-"

"What's _that_ supposed to mean?"

Hiccup was flustered. "Huh?"

"Are you _sorry_ they did it? Do you want _out_? Is there someone _else_? You better tell me _now_." She still stared straight at the fire. She wanted the truth from his own mouth.

He sighed. "It's just that with people telling me I could pick who I wanted, you'd be mad ifâ€¦ if it was you."

"So now I'm supposed to be mad. Am I supposed to be _disappointed_, too?"

"It's just that being stuck with me-"

"Hiccup, listen to me good. I don't look at it like that. Tell me the truth."

He collapsed on himself. "No. No, I'm _not_ sorry. I couldn't imagine anything _better_ in my entire life. Someone _else_? Get real. I never imagined anybody at all wanting _me_, much lessâ€¦ you."

He stared at the side of her face. "Nothing in my life ever scared me as much as you falling off Stormfly during the battle. _Nothing_. Not even fighting it. Not evenâ€¦" His voice trailed off.

She couldn't take any more. She stared back into his eyes. "Then there's nothing more to say about it. You are stuck with me, and that's that."

He smiled, bigger this time. "Could we take some time to get to know each other before we get married?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Okay, I'll agree we need some time. But with our parent's attitude, they'll have us married next summer."

"I think we can have some time."

"How's that?"

Hiccup explained. "In the Great Hall, dad was telling me about all the women, and the families that gave him marriage offers. One of them was Phlegma."

"Phlegma the Fierce? Her oldest daughter's like, what? _Ten?_"

Hiccup nodded. "Yep. Scared me half to death. I didn't know if I was going to be a husband or a babysitter. But then he told me about the customs around betrothal."

"Which are?"

"Well, sometimes families make agreements while the kids are still being carried around in baskets. Alliances, political reasonsâ€| whatever. Dad says that a betrothalâ€| an _official_ oneâ€| can last years before anyone's expected to get married."

"But we're not ten."

"I'll bet we can find a way, though."

Astrid looked at him closely. "Is this some kind of noble way of saying you don't want to marry me?"

He shook his head. "No way. I just thought we should talk some first. I've never been _close_ to a girl before. I just know I'm going to mess this up like everything else." He raised his arms. "Hel, I don't even know how to _talk_ to you, much less any of that marriage stuff."

Astrid's heart melted at that. He _still_ assumed he would screw it up. "We'll work everything out. If notâ€| I've still got my axe."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"Still doesn't help the real problem, though."

"After my last couple of weeks, could you _finally_ tell me what the _real_ problem is, then?"

"My father, and his being so greedy." She looked down. "Hiccup, I'm really sorry about that. It's not me."

He sighed. "I know. And I don't care about the money. I just hate to see you put up like a yak for auction."

She looked sideways at him. "Happens all the time. You've seen it."

"But it wasn'tâ€| you. You're too good for that. And you _still_ got shackled to me."

She was surprised to hear bitterness in his voice. "But, Hiccupâ€¦ that means I _won_."

He looked at her with lowered eyebrows. "Huh?"

She smiled. "Look at it from my side for a second. Dad was going to make sure I married _someone_. You're cuter than Tuff, and you're at least as smart as Fish. So I _won_. Ruff loses, no matter who she picks."

"You left out Snotlout."

"For Odin's sake, don't _remind_ me. He'll make a fine husband, I'm sure. Probably to a girl from a village far away enough that they haven't heard of him. Maybe a deaf one with no sense of smell."

Hiccup thought a minute. "So you're happy that you got the least nauseating one of us, is that it?"

"Hiccup! Stop trying to twist everything I say around."

"Sorry. I'm just not used to beingâ€¦" He got quiet.

"Liked? Worshiped? Chased by women?"

"More like tolerated."

She looked at him closely. She tried to imagine his last few years. The crazy inventions, odd behavior, all his reading and writingâ€¦

"You learned to like being alone, didn't you?"

He shrugged. "It made things easier." He looked back at her. "You know what really bothers me now?"

She shook her head slightly.

"Dad actually asked me to look over Fishlegs notes he made about using dragons to defend Berk. He says he wants to make sure I approve of them." He looked back to the fire. "I used to be a _nobody_. Now people think I'm Midgard's greatest expert on dragons."

"Well, you are."

He shook his head. "I think I'm just lucky. Most of what I did should have killed me. But nowâ€¦ I'm going to be responsible for everyone. I could screw this up so easy."

Astrid slid over, and reached across the pack to grab his hand. "But you won't. You'll complain, and then you'll think, and then right at the last momentâ€¦ _Bang_! _Idea_."

She shook his arm to get his attention. "Remember the battle? You gave orders like a _Chief_. Everybody had a job, and you knew just who did what."

"That's an awful lot to stake everybody's life on."

He looked into her eyes. "The other night, when you asked me why I liked you. Now it's your turn."

She started. "Huh?" He changed course as fast as Loki.

"Why me? It can't _just_ be all of the barely contained raw Vikingness."

She frowned. "Some of itâ€¦ I don't knowâ€¦ I just don't have _words_ for." She looked at the fire. "But you care about everyone. Not just people, but dragonsâ€¦ and, who knows what else. You have more courage than anyone I know."

Then she smiled. "And you like flying. You proved me wrong about so many things, and for a while I thought I hated you for it. But it was really just me fighting something new. I don't want to do that anymore."

She winked. "I wanted adventure and danger. Now I know that if I want them, all I have to do is stick around _you_. Aaaaannnnnnnd, you just happen to really be the cutest of the bunch. So a double win for me."

She watched him visibly relax a bit.

She reached over and put a hand on his knee. The left one. He flinched badly.

"Stop that, Hiccup. It can't bother me. You're going to have to get over that."

She squeezed his knee, and then reached for the pack. "It's getting late, and I'm hungry from all this talk." She handed him one of the water skins. "Go easy on this until we find a spring or something." She unwrapped some dried yak.

She handed him a chunk of yak. "Well, eat up, we've got a busy day tomorrow." She chewed on a piece.

"Doing what?"

She grabbed for the water to wash down the tough-as-boot-leather dried meat. "Um. Good point. I guess I'm just used to saying that."

The tents were near the fire. Toothless and Stormfly were having fun with it. As they wrapped themselves up in the blankets and fur, Hiccup's question, in a sound of almost desperation, still echoed in her head.

Why me?

That boy is going to need some work.

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Camicazi walked down the rocky beach watching the sun go down. She didn't want to go against her mother, but she didn't like this plan.

Hiccup was kind, and courteous to people. These were traits she didn't see in a lot of people here. She didn't think it was right to hurt him, not after his life.

She sighed. What about her mother's question? Did she have any feelings for him? Even that went against part of the Bog-Burglars' creed. Most of the warriors were women. They were as tough, as skilled, and as rude as any men. When they wanted babies, they simply went to some port and found a good man for a few days.

Needless to say, they weren't too big on long relationships, or domestic qualities. There were very few marriages here.

Most of the boys grew up and moved to other tribes. The Chief made sure they were schooled, well trained, well outfitted, and ready for life. A few girls went to other islands, but most stayed here.

There were some men here. Skilled labor, like blacksmiths or shipwrights, were mostly men. A few women were bakers, carpenters, and such. Anyone with the skill could be a healer. But only a truly skilled man would be tolerated by the women as a warrior.

She smiled. Occasionally, some young man would get off a ship, thinking to be the rooster in the henhouse with a company of women fighters. They were soon sent packing, their self-importance deflated. Most got to keep all their appendages.

So she didn't think of marriage much. She knew someday she would have an heir. And if it was a boy, well, she was expected to keep trying.

But Hiccup now, that boy wasn't your everyday Viking, was he? Maybe with a little training, though that

She shook her head. What was she thinking? Hiccup couldn't live here. She couldn't live there, either.

And what about the dragons? She had no idea what a Night Fury looked like, only Johann's description and crude drawing. If Hiccup could control such an animal, that would make him worthy to have anyone.

Even the Bog-Burglars future Chief. But she would have to convince him first. What would be the best way, she wondered? Her mother's ideas seemed pretty mean, but could there be a nicer way?

And why does she care about that?

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Ruffnut sat on a rock in the clearing. She had been there a few hours. The pounding in her head had dulled to a light tapping. She felt she might almost be hungry. So she was only mildly worried when Sif came out from behind a tree.

"So. You're alone. The girl must be dead, then."

Ruffnut shook her head carefully. "No, but I couldn't stop it. She and Hiccup were sent off from Berk this morning."

Sif looked confused. "Sent off? On a trip?"

Ruffnut stood up. "No. They got themselves banished."

"_What_!?"

Ruffnut put her hands up and stepped back. "Not _forever_! Just a week or so. Something about a few dragon haters making some trouble."

Sif relaxed a bit. "That's better. Where did they go, then?"

Ruffnut shrugged. "Beats me. They just took their gear and _left_." She looked around, checking the sun. She pointed. "_That_ way, I think. Nobody knows."

Sif thought a moment. "This makes things a bit difficult."

Ruffnut looked at her. "What's the big deal? Just use your God powers to find them. You can do all that other stuff, right?"

Sif frowned. "It's not so easy. We aren't supposed to be hanging around Midgard too much. And Odin's scrying magic is guarded."

Ruffnut backed up a few steps. "Now wait a minute. Wait just _one_ minute, here. Finding Astrid is one thing, but I'm not getting _Gods_ mad at me now."

"Yet you'd risk _my_ anger?"

"Yeah, but you're not a _Goddess_, _remember_? You're an Aasgardian that married a Demi-God. I got a memory."

"Close enough for you, young one."

Ruffnut sighed. What had she gotten mixed up in _this_ time? "Okay. If anybody at all had a hint where they went, it would be the Chief. I can talk to him. But she'll be back in five days anyway."

Sif nodded. "It might could wait. I really just wanted to warn her."

"_Warn_ her? About _what_? _Trouble_? She's out there _alone_ with _Hiccup_!"

"Then she is not alone."

"Well, you don't know _Hiccup_, do you?" Then she thought about it. "Wait. I forget. They've got Toothless and Stormfly with them."

"Ah, then the four of them could handle themselves?"

"Especially since two of them are dragons!"

"Wait. They travel with these beasts? They stay with them? All the time?"

"Sure. You should see Fishlegs and his Gronckle. He made his bed bigger for her. And Toothless never gets too far away from Hiccup."

Sif frowned. "That could make things difficult."

"So I go talk to the Chief?"

Sif thought. "All right. But I'm coming with you."

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"Kara, I trust you more than anyone. _Why_ hasn't this been done?"

Freya was angry. She didn't mean to take it out on Kara, but she happened to be the one in charge of this.

Kara raised her hands in confusion. "I don't _know_! The horses don't seem to be able to find him. Or get anywhere near him." She leaned on the table across from Freya. "We knew exactly where he was on that island the day he fell. But that night, something protected him. Since then, we've been searching to no avail. And I don't get why, since the horses can find any mortal on command."

Freya thought on this. Any _mortal_. But this boy carries the blood of Asgard. Could that be something important here?

The flying horses of Asgardâ€¦ Created thousands of years ago by Odin's father, for the Valkyries to gather the souls of the slain for Valhalla. They never tire, are totally fearless, completely loyal to their ridersâ€¦ and unable to find one boy on an island? What is going on here?

Freya looked up. Badgering Kara won't help this. Kara has been her second-in-command of the Valkyries for centuries. She knows this action can break Odin's law, but yet she is still faithful to her.

"Very well, Kara, but keep trying. I need to know at least where he is. Perhaps other events can be arranged."

She waved her away. Kara left to return to the search.

It looks like I will have to do this myself.

Kara left the office biting her lip in frustration. She did not like to bring Freya bad news. _Ever_. And not just out of fear for her anger, which was legendary.

-Kara, the troll-faced, short, stout little girl. She had few friends growing up. She became tough on the insideâ€¦ and the outside. Taking the vows of a shield-maiden, she became the best in her tribe, and proved herself in battle a hundred times over. She never had a man problem, since none would approach her. From the taunts and insults as children to being ignored as a woman, she had let that hate fester into an anger and skill that made some warriors drop their swords and run when faced by her.

But as fate will catch up with everyone, she was finally bested in battle. She had been accepted into the Great Halls of Valhalla. Freya had come to her there, praised her, and offered her the chance to be one of her Valkyries. She had leaped at that chance.

She looked in one of the large mirrors in the hallway. What reflected back at her was not the same Kara of Midgard. She was tall, beautiful, and graceful. Yet she still kept all of her fighting skills. Donning the red corset of Freya's company had bestowed upon her the gifts of eternal youth and beauty all Valkyries receive. And she liked it.

She loved Freya with all her heart. And if Freya wanted this boy dead, she would make sure it happened. But
how?

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Gothi was at her work table, where she made her potions, balms, and other healing mixtures. Again she sniffed the goblet, and yet again, the pungent odor caused her to draw back quickly. She had been studying this to satisfy her curiosity, and flustered at her findings. And so few things flustered her after all this time.

She picked up a small, flat piece of metal she used to cut and mix ingredients. There was a thick layer of some strange substance in this goblet, the source of the smell. Carefully, she worked the tool around the inside, breaking loose flakes of whatever it had contained.

Eventually, on a piece of parchment, she had a small pile of the noxious stuff. She walked over to the cauldron boiling on the fire, and scooped some water into the goblet. Then she dumped the powder into the goblet, and stirred it with a spoon.

She watched the water begin to give a light blue glow. Putting down the spoon, she held the goblet in both hands, soundlessly muttered a prayer to Loki, and drank.

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The sun was getting rather low as Ruffnut and Sif approached the village. Sif began to feel uneasy. She began walking slower. Each step began to feel as if some weight was pushing her back. She began breathing heavier as she forced herself to go forward a few more steps. Finally she stopped. She leaned over, hands on her knees panting heavily.

Ruffnut was a few steps ahead, looking back and watching. "What's wrong?" She walked back to stand in front of the woman. "Wow. Your face is red. Are you okay?"

Sif shook her head. "Loki was right."

Ruffnut's eyebrows went up. "_Loki_, now? Anybody _else_ I should know about?" She was getting more scared as more dangerous names started flying around.

Sif tried to smile. "A few. Nothing to worry about." She took several steps backwards. The pressure eased slightly. "I can't do this." She

turned and walked away from the village.

Ruffnut trailed behind her. "What is it? You're allergic to Vikings? No, wait. _I'm_ a Viking. Give me a hint. Swords? _Men_?"

Sif was feeling better now. She turned and faced the twin.
"Dragons."

Ruffnut's eyes were as big as plates. "_Dragons_? You're _kidding_ me, right? You do know that Berk is the _one_ village that's full of them, don't you?"

Sif smiled. "It's a long story."

Ruffnut crossed her arms. "I've got time."

"About two thousand years."

"_Okay_. But when I get to Valhalla, I better get the whole thing."

"It's a deal. Now go talk to this Chief of yours, and meet me in the clearing tomorrow."

Ruffnut turned and walked quickly towards the Great Hall.

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15. Realize the Obvious

****Realize the Obvious.****

Ruffnut went into the Great Hall. There were quite a few people eating and talking, since once the sun went down, outside work was halted. At the head table, she saw Stoick and Gobber talking over food and drink.

"I'm worried, Gobber."

"Ye've no reason to, Stoick. E's got that bloody Night Fury with 'im, an' if that's not enough, there's _Astrid_. An' personally, I'd rather face the Night Fury."

"Aye. She's not one to be crossed lightly." Stoick looked at his old friend. "Did we do the right thing, though? I had thought to match him with a lass a bitâ€¦| _calmer_, if you get me."

"I know, Stoick. But the boy lost his heart long ago to that one." He smiled as he raised his mug.

Ruffnut stood in front of the table. Stoick looked at her.

"What can I help you with?"

Ruffnut fidgeted. "Well, Chief, I just sort of wantedâ€¦| to maybe knowâ€¦| well, if you know anything about where they went."

Stoick lowered his brow. "Ye know they can't have any help from the

village, girl."

"I knowâ€| butâ€| there's a big storm from the East. I just want to make sure they're okay." She tried to look bored. "It's no big deal, sir."

Stoick tried not to smile. "I see. They didn't go East, if that's botherin' ye, then."

"And the Outcasts have been causing trouble to the West. I wanted to make sure they didn't find them."

"Don't worry about that, Ruffnut." Stoick saw her start to open her mouth again. He raised a hand. "Now, nobody knows where they've gone. But, mind you, he might just be visiting our old friends for a few days." He lowered his voice more. "But ye can't follow them. You'll be missed, an' then there's more trouble."

Southeast. "Oh, I have _no_ intention of getting _myself_ in troubleâ€| _this_ time, Chief. Thank you." She went to get some food.

Stoick smoothed his beard. Maybe it was best he didn't question this too much. But he would keep track of her for the next week or so.

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Astrid got up as the light began to make the inside of the tent visible. She had had a restless night, with little sleep. She had a lot to adjust herself to. The biggest thing, however, was still sleeping in the tent a few feet away, given the snoring.

She had spent most of the night thinking about him. She was confused about her feelings. To tell the truth, she wasn't even used to thinking that much about them. Or even _feeling_ them.

Part of her thought about her talk with Loki. Was she looking at this as a _job_? A task to perform for some kind of a _reward_? But Hiccup wasâ€| _special_. He _knew_ thingsâ€| he could do things nobody _else_ could. Andâ€| sheâ€| _liked_ him. Just _liked_?

She smiled. How deep did her unspoken, even unthought feelings go? She knew now he was important to Berk. She also felt, somehow, that he was important to her. _Very_ important.

She frowned and squirmed as she sat. Ever since that first ride with Toothless, she felt, well, _warmer_ towards him. She liked him, _that_ much was for sure. She wanted to punish herself somehow for not realizing over the years just what kind of a Viking he was. And somehow, that skinny boy brought out all that she had never shown anyone.

Then there was the thing at the Great Hall yesterday. She was too shocked to feel much then. She just followed that voice in her that told her to stand with Hiccup, no matter what happened.

Her head was still going in circles about all this as she got out of tent. She looked at the fire. It was large, and still going strong. The dragons had brought what looked like a ton or so of wood, and

kept the whole clearing warm all night. Stormfly and Toothless were lying on their sides, feet towards the fire.

"Lazy beasts." She smiled as Stormfly partially opened the eye facing her. The only sign Toothless was awake was the fact his tail swished.

She _thwacked_ the side of Hiccup's tent several times. "Hey! Get up!"

The snoring was replaced by a snort and confused mumblings.

"Not a morning person, are you?"

"Whaâ€¦ Astrid?"

"Yeah, I'm still here. Are you coming out, or do I come in and get you?"

"Ohâ€¦ justâ€¦ waitâ€¦"

She pulled open the flap. Hiccup was sitting up, mostly dressed. He held his artificial leg in one hand. His head snapped towards her as he grabbed the fur and pulled it over his legs.

"_Hey_! Ummmâ€¦ a little privacy, _please_, Astrid."

She entered and sat down. "Hiccup, you're going to get over this leg thing, one way or the other." Quickly, she reached over and snatched the leg from his hand. "Let me help."

She saw the look on his face then. _Fear_.

"You don't wantâ€¦ to see-"

"Hiccup. I've seen it. I was there when Berta cut it off. It's okay."

His eyes got wide. "You _did_? You were there?"

"Yep. So you can't scare me off that way." With her other arm she slowly pushed him back down.

"It's justâ€¦ gross."

She shook her head. "It happens to people. That's all." She moved the fur out of the way. She fitted the cup to the stump and started fastening the straps to it. She knew that the straps ran from a belt he wore under his clothes to a support strap just above his knee. As she tightened it, she looked at him. His eyes were closed, and his arms drawn up over his chest. His hands were tight fists.

"There. All done. You can look at me now." She patted his knee and pulled the pants leg down.

His eyes opened. "Uhâ€¦ thanks."

"Hiccup, this won't make me like you any less." She said as she crawled out the tent.

She stood some feet back from the fire. The dragons must like it warm. Toothless and Stormfly had both rolled over, and were lying there watching her.

She heard Hiccup behind her. "Wow! No wonder it didn't get so cold last night."

Toothless walked over to him, nudging him. Hiccup smiled and scratched the dragon's neck. "Morning, bud."

Stormfly took that as the signal for attention, and rubbed the side of her nose against Astrid.

Hiccup looked at her. "We didn't bring any fish with us. I wonder if Gobber gave us tackle."

Astrid laughed. "Hiccup, dragons have been getting their own food long before they knew us. They just like being lazy." Then she thought about Toothless. "Oh, that's right. He can't fly alone."

"Not _yet_." Hiccup said. "I think I know a way to help him fly on his own. I'm going to try something when we get back." He grabbed his saddle and threw it over the Night Fury's back. "But for now, it's going to be a wet morning."

Stormfly saw Hiccup getting ready to fly and squawked at Astrid, while pointing her nose to her saddle.

"Oh, so you want to go, too, girl?" She started getting the Nadder ready.

Later, laughing and wet from the waist down, the riders brought their dragons back to land near the fire. Both dragons dropped a few fish they had saved on the ground at their riders' feet.

Astrid raised a brow. "Yuck. Are we supposed to eat _those_?"

Hiccup laughed as he grabbed a couple of small branches to spear the fish on for the fire. "It's not bad, really. Well, as long as you cook them a while."

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Camicazi was standing near the edge of the village. She had been watching the large bowl her mother had ordered placed there. It was filled with an assortment of local fish. _No_ _eels_, the notes had said.

She had watched several Nadders, a Zippleback, a half-dozen Gronckles, and a beauty of a Monstrous Nightmare land, look around, then eat from the bowl before flying off. They really were beautiful creatures, when they weren't burning everything down.

The truce between dragons and people was holding. Hiccup had been right.

She felt someone walk up beside her. She glanced over her shoulder. "Morning, mom."

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Big-Boobied Bertha was looking at a new world. She wondered how Stoick felt. "It must have been something at Berk.", She mused to nobody in particular. "Stoick hated dragons _so_ much after Valka. Now his son rides them."

"Mom, I wonder what he's like now." Camicazi had been trying to imagine the slightly-built boy she knew.

"Stoick or Hiccup?"

"_Hiccup_. Did he have toâ€¦| _change_ to do all that?"

"You got pretty friendly with him last time we were there. I noticed. So did Stoick. _That's_ when I got that offer of marriage."

Camicazi shrugged. "I didn't think I was _that_ friendly." Then she thought about how everyone else treated him. "Did he have to change to train them? Did he have to beâ€¦| _mean_ or something?"

Bertha looked at her daughter. "Thinking a lot about him, are we?"

"It's justâ€¦| mom, I don't like your plan. But I'm not stupid. You're going to do _something_ about this. And I want to help my tribe."

She glared at her mother. "But I _won't_ hurt him, mom. Iâ€¦| _can't_!"

Bertha sighed. "Can you at least tell me why?"

The girl shook her head. "I don't _know_. It's confusing. But _something_ tells me it would be badâ€¦| _very_ bad to harm him."

Bertha put a hand on Camicazi's shoulder. "Well, why don't we just see what happens next. Maybe you'll like him." She leaned over and whispered. "Maybe you can make him like you."

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Hiccup finished the fish and threw the bones in the fire. He stretched his legsâ€¦| _leg_ out towards the fire and sighed.

"You know, maybe I'll just _stay_ banished."

Astrid frowned at him, chewing the last of her cod. "_Mwwmff_?"

He smiled at her. "No responsibilities, no duty. Nothing to worry aboutâ€¦|" Then his face went dark. "â€¦|or worrying about getting someone killed."

Astrid swallowed. "You can't mean that."

"I can't mean that I don't want to be Chief? Care to bet?"

"I mean you can't _not_ care about Berk."

He sighed. "It hasn't been bad lately. But Astrid, there never was a

lot for me there. You know how it was. Berk would be better off without me. You guys know dragons now, so everything would just keep going on."

Astrid threw the stick holding the remains of her fish. "Was! Listen to yourself!" She stood up and waved a fist at him. "I am not going to let you keep doing that! Yes! We were bad to you. We were mean, and selfish, andâ€¦ andâ€¦" She sank to her knees and wrapped her arms around him. "And I'll do anything I can to make it up to you. Becauseâ€¦ sorry doesn't do any good."

She had her face pressed against his chest. "But you've got to at least give meâ€¦ us a chance to try."

He stuttered. "Iâ€¦ ohâ€¦ ummmâ€¦"

She leaned back and lightly punched his shoulder. "You've got to make up your mind before I go crazy, Hiccup. Do you really want that? A crazy girlâ€¦ with an axe?"

He looked down. "Astridâ€¦ part of me wants to just go home and marry you. And that means running Berk. But I'm no good at that."

"Fine. Then marry me, and I'll run Berk. You can go play with your dragons, and your books, and your forge."

"What?"

"Hiccup, have you noticed that Stoick doesn't do everything alone? Gobber handles the village stuff, Spitelout organizes the defensesâ€¦ you'll have help, Hiccup. And nobody says you have to be Chief tomorrow."

"I thought if you punched me, you had to kiss me."

"I'm mad at you right now. Make up your mind. Becauseâ€¦ if I'm going to be an Outlaw with you I have to know."

"What? You can't do that!"

"Says who? IF you do thatâ€¦ un-Chief thing, then you have no right to tell me what to do anymore." Then she smiled. "But the Chief's sonâ€¦ he could tell me to do all sorts of things."

"Okay, I'm not going to sleep tonight just thinking about that."

Astrid picked up the water skin. "That's why I said it."

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Ruffnut peeked around the tree. She smiled. She's not sneaking up on me this time. She tiptoed, quiet as a squirrel, toward the next tree.

"Hi!"

Ruffnut jumped a foot in the air, her spear flying off to one side.

"Were you hunting?"

Ruffnut, still shaking, turned to see a smiling Sif in front of her.
"How do you _do_ that?"

"What did you learn?"

Ruffnut smiled. "Well, I learned where they _aren't_ going, for starters."

"Hmmm. So if we know where they're not going, then what's left is where they're _not_â€| not going." Sif looked confused.

"Right!"

"I'm glad that makes sense to someone."

"See, they aren't going North, because there's nothing there but cold and Helheim's Gate."

"Okay."

"And the Chief said they wouldn't hit that bad storm in the East."

"Better."

"_Aaannnd_, they wouldn't have to worry about tribe troubles in the West."

"I'm starting to follow you. So South it is. Anyâ€|" She wiggled her fingers. "â€|better news than that?"

"Our old friends, the Bog-Burglars. He sort-of said he just might have recommended that to Hiccup."

"Ah! And they are?"

"Southwest of here. About three days by boat. You'd like them."

"Why?"

"Because they are almost completely women warriors. If it wasn't for my stupid _boy_ brother, I'd probably join them myself."

"I didn't know there was another _kind_ of brother. I thought they were all boys."

"_Oh_, you know what I mean!"

Sif thought. "If they are riding dragons, they'd be there before now, wouldn't they?"

Ruffnut smiled. "But I bet they don't go there yet."

Sif looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

Ruffnut clasped her hands together. "Astrid has to be back in five days, or be accused of helping Hiccup. No one from the tribe can help him in any way. " She fluttered her eyelashes. "Now, if I were Astrid, I'd find a nice, cozy place to have him all to myself 'til then." Her eyes got dreamy. "Someplace he couldn't escapeâ€¦ I mean, be distracted."

Sif considered this. "But what about Hiccup?"

Ruffnut elbowed her lightly. "Come _on_! A chance to be alone with a girl practically _throwing_ herself at him? He's a male, isn't he?"

Sif nodded. "That much is true. Men are a _grabby_ bunch. But won't he get bugs?"

"Huh?"

"The bugs! You said her hair was full of bugs."

"Oh, _that_! Well, I _might_ have stretched that one just a bit."

"How so stretched?"

"I, uh, think she washed or something. _Yep_â€¦ no more bugs."

Sif tapped her cheek. "So I go South to the Southwest, and look for a place on the way to this tribe you talk about." She sighed. "This could still be difficult."

"How? Don't you Gods just _poof_ and go places?"

"Ehhh, not _quite_ like that. I can only go one place at a time. And I have to know where I'm going. I have to _know_ _where_ they are to find them."

"Huh?"

"Your face is going to stick like that, you know. If I have to search, I would have to borrow one of Freya's horses, and she wouldn't allow that."

"Then there's the dragons, right?"

"True. Even knowing where they were wouldn't let me get to them. Nobody of Asgard can, apparentlyâ€¦ save _one_."

"Easy, then. Just get this one God to go do whatever it is you need."

"It's Loki."

"I hear my brother calling me. I've really, _really_ got to go. Hope you, wellâ€¦" Ruffnut turned and ran for her life.

"Bye." Sif said absentmindedly, lost in thought.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Hiccup was leaning up against Toothless. He had started drawing something, but was now lost in thought. His lips were turning black from chewing on his charcoal stick.

Astrid looked over at him. "Problem?"

Hiccup looked up. "Just remembering. You started this, you know."

"Me? How did I start thisâ€¦ and what is _this_?"

Hiccup smiled. "The whole dragon thing. I was making friends with Toothless, but I hadn't gotten any farther than that. I didn't know what to do. Then you yelled at me."

"That doesn't narrow it down much. I yelled at you a lot."

"In dragon training. Remember the wall course? With the Nadder?"

Astrid remembered. "That's when you kept going on asking Gobber about Night Furies. We should have known something was up."

Hiccup nodded. "Then at the end, _that_ time you yelled at me."

Is this some kind of a joke to you? Our parents' war is about to become ours! Figure out which side you're on!

Astrid sighed. "Yes, I remember."

Hiccup pointed at her. "That's when I made a decision. I didn't want to pick a side. I didn't think there should even _be_ sides."

Astrid frowned. "But we didn't know about the Queen then. What were you going to do?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I was thinking about capturing as many as I could to train them. But thennnâ€¦"

He sat up straight. "Astrid, you've been behind the whole thing since the start." He looked at her. "I couldn't have done it without you."

Astrid tilted her head and smiled. "I'm flattered. But, you've already impressed me. Giant dragon, remember?"

Hiccup stood up and was pacing. "I was going to leave Berk that night forever. But you caught me. If I hadn't given you that rideâ€¦"

"Which I really liked a lot. We should do it again."

"â€¦we wouldn't have found the nest!"

He stood stock still. "I would have left, and the war would go on forever."

Astrid didn't like that look. She walked up to him and grabbed his shoulders. "_Hiccup_! All these what-ifs don't change one _thing_!"

She looked straight into his eyes. "I didn't know what I was doing, either! You say I did all this stuff, but I didn't know what would happen!"

She looked down. "When I found you and Toothless, and ran awayâ€¦ I wasâ€¦ going to tell Stoick thatâ€¦ youâ€¦ _betrayed_ us. I don't deserve any respect for that."

Astrid took a deep breath. _There_, she had said it. _Now_ she would face his judgment.

Hiccup gently put a finger under her chin and lifted her head to face him. "_That's_ all that was worrying you?"

Astrid looked at his face. "Isn't that enough? I was going to turn you in."

Hiccup smiled. "Astrid, I didn't think you were running back to tell them about the _weather_. That's why I took the chance to try and show you what Toothless was really like. Because if I couldn't convince _you_â€¦ well, anything else would have been worthless."

She wrapped her arms around him. "You're being all _noble_ again. Stop it."

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Sif went into the small eating room overlooking the mountains. Her husband was there, finishing off what looked like an entire leg of mutton.

She sat down. "I'm amazed you don't stay sick."

Thor smiled. "But I'm just a growing boy." He studied her face. "You worry about something."

She sighed. "I was trying to find the girl, but they're somewhere I can't locate."

"Any _particular_ girl?" He smiled.

She raised her brow. "You know something, don't you?"

He made a show of draining a mug of ale to wash down the mutton. "If you mean did she pray for guidance and I just might have sent her somewhere, would that be enough?"

"You, Frigg, _Loki_â€¦ what is it about this girl? I didn't see this much cooperation during the Great War."

"How did _you_ get in this, then?"

She sighed. "Frigg. You know her and her one-track mind."

"Ah. Love, then."

She nodded. "Something about this boy. And her. And _dragons_, for father-in-law's sake."

He sat back in the chair. "Father knows something about this young man. He means for him to have allies."

"And Frigg thinks this girl loves him."

Thor drummed his fingers on the table. "And Loki wantsâ€¦|_something_. I do not know what. Even father is closed-mouth about this." He looked at his wife. "But we are all hoping for the same thing here, aren't we?"

Sif nodded. "But I wanted to see her. But they have dragons now. And it seems this boy has a particularly difficult one."

"Then you must talk to Loki about this."

"I'll try. But he's been lying low lately. He doesn't seem to want to draw attention to this."

"But he is the only one here who can get to them. They are protected from us now. Even father won't break the dragon magic Loki has placed on them."

"Okay. I'll find him."

"Well, he and that new bride of his seldom leave his chambers. Now those two Vikings are atâ€¦|"

As Sif left, she never saw Kara listening from outside the door. She snuck off to see what Freya would make of this information.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Astrid tried some of the dried mutton, hoping it was better than the dried yak. It wasn't, but it was filling. She glanced over at Hiccup, gnawing on a piece, looking at her.

"You keep staring at me. Have I grown horns or something?" She looked behind her. "Maybe a tail?"

He swallowed. "Sorry. It's like some of the old magic people talk about. I just look around and there you are. I don't think I'll ever get used to it. I wonder when I'm going to wake up."

She turned away. She didn't want him to see the slight blush she felt rising. She still didn't know how he could do that to her. He never had _before_. "Well, if we get betrothed, you'll get used to it fast enough."

Hiccup leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and looked into the fire. "That's the next step. I still haven't got a plan for that."

Astrid turned around. "Plan for what?"

"For getting the money for your father. Gold isn't easy to come by on Berk. I may have to go somewhere else for a while."

She lowered her brows, her eyes mere slits. "And do _what_?"

He shrugged. "I can make weapons. Vikings _always_ need weapons. I

could be a blacksmith somewhere, like the Bog-Burglars. They're always trading for swords and axes."

"When did you start making weapons?"

"I have for years. Pretty good ones, too." He pointed beside her. "I made your axe."

She reached around and picked it up. "Mom said _Gobber_ made it." Her head snapped around. "Hiccup, has he been taking credit for _your_ work all this time? When I get back I'm going to-"

"_No_!" Hiccup put his hands up. "Astrid, it's not like that at all! I can explain!"

"It had better be _good_."

Hiccup pulled out his dagger. "This is the first one I made. I've had it since I was twelve."

"I've seen it. It's pretty good. Plain, but balanced, and holds a nice edge."

He ran a hand through his hair. "Well, I made a few swords, and a few knives. I even made some tools and household things. Gobber sold them." He grinned slightly. "I told him that people wouldn't want anything made by Hiccup the Useless, so I asked him not to tell anyone."

"So all this time, we've been using swords _you_ made? And nobody knew it? Not even _Stoick_?"

Hiccup shook his head. "Nope. Not even dad knew it. Gobber let me do more work when people started bragging that his new stuff didn't break easily."

"So you've never been _useless_, have you? I saw the ideas you gave the healers." Then she thought of something. "But you made a lot of money doing that, right?"

He shook his head. "Gobber and I bought extra stuff for the village those last few years. Dad just thought he was paying for it all. He didn't have enough for everything."

Astrid thought. "I hate to say it, but it sounds like a good idea. I haven't got a better one yet."

"Glad you approve. Cause I was going there."

Astrid fidgeted a little. "Well, we have to go before I have to get back to Berk, then. I don't want you just dropping in unannounced _alone_."

They started talking about breaking camp and flying out the next morning.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Berta entered Gothi's hut. She saw her frail form lying near the hearth. Rushing over, she turned her over.

Gothi was asleep, with a calm look on her wrinkled face.

She must have gotten tired from reading late. She thought, looking at the books lying around.

She easily picked up the frail old woman and laid her in her cot, pulling a blanket over her.

She went over to stoke the fire, and put a few more logs on. Someone from the village made the trip up here every day to fill the bin by the fireplace.

Then she saw the goblet lying off to one side.

She picked it up. Yes, it was the same one she had brought here. She smelled it. There was almost no odor now.

She turned and looked at Gothi. _What has that crazy old woman done now?_

16. Keep Calm

****16. Keep Calm.****

Astrid looked around her. She actually liked this. Big fire, dragons, quiet—it was a nice break after the last month. Dragon Training had made her a bundle of nerves, especially when she couldn't figure out how Hiccup was beating her. Then the battle, followed by a week of worry as he slept. She gnawed on a fat fish Stormfly had donated after another flight. It was a sight better than the dried mutton.

She looked over at Hiccup. He had a bundle of sheets of parchment held together with a small metal clip on one corner. She now knew he kept that as a way to make lists or notes to follow up on later.

Currently, he was sitting on the ground, leaning against the log. He would think, write something, think again, scratch off whatever note he had just made, then start over again. He was obviously trying to solve something.

She sat down on the log beside him. "Another Midgard-shattering problem?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"Well, what is it? If your face is like that, _you_ think it's important." Astrid was still trying to figure his mind. One frustrating thing still was that when he worked on something, it was with his whole self. But it could be anything from a new kind of fishhook, to weapons, to things that could change the world. He didn't seem to see a difference. She needed a hint.

He sighed. "Remember what we wanted to do our whole lives just a short time ago?"

She nodded, but saw he wasn't looking at her. "Yes." _Kill

dragons._

He put down the paper and stick, and turned towards her. "We need a new system."

She blinked at him, lifting her chin a bit and blinking in that '_Well, out with it'_ thing.

"We knew thatâ€|" He glanced over to Toothless and Stormfly lazing near the fire. "â€| doing _you know what_ to _you know who_ gave us status, right?"

She nodded.

"I knew that a Gronckle would get a girl to notice me. I figured a Nadder would at least get me a date."

Astrid started. "Hold on a minute. You weren't doing all that to impress your _dad_? You weren't going for the glory of _Berk_? You just wantedâ€| _a date_?"

He looked down and nodded. "This is _me_, remember."

She suddenly thought of something else. "And you always saying you were going to be the first to take down a Night Fury?"

He turned a bit red. "Then maybe _you'd_ talk to me."

Astrid sighed. "Well, it worked, didn't it?"

He jerked his head up to look at her.

She waved. "You got your Night Fury, and I'm talking. It worked."

"Not quite the way I thought about it for a couple years, butâ€| _yeah_, I guess it did."

She smiled. "Hiccup, _none_ of your ideas work out the way you _think_ they will. But somehow, they just work out."

She moved down and sat beside him, leaning against the log. "Soâ€| what's this about a new system?"

He picked up the notes and waved them. "Now that we quit you _know what-ing_ the _you know whos_, people are going to want to know how we get status now."

She got it. "_Right_. Okay." Vikings always looked for a way to get glory and recognition. They loved to brag. She thought. "Wellâ€| we've still got battles. There's always _something_ to fight about." She drew a blank.

She shrugged.

He handed her the papers. "I want you and Fishlegs to sit down and talk when you get back. See if you can come up with a few ideas."

She stared at his face. "Huh? Why _me_?"

"Astrid, you're one of the best warriors we have. I messed up _everything_ you trained for. Whatever idea we have, you'd have to approve of it."

She blinked. Then she grabbed his arm and pulled him around next to her. She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Thanks. And you didn't mess everything up." She leaned her head over against the top of his shoulder.

"But you sure did make life interesting."

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Sif knocked on the door.

"It's open, Sif."

She walked in. She gave up wondering how he did that long ago.

He was sitting at a small table with Thessa. They were having some wine. They both smiled.

Loki got up and walked over. "Well, good morning. We were just talking about you."

Sif narrowed her gaze. "You were."

Loki waved her to a third chair that Sif was _sure_ wasn't there a few seconds ago. "Of course, dear Sif. You want to see the girl. But you have a _bit_ of a problem, don't you?"

Sif sat down. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Loki sat back down. "Wine? No? Well, two can ask that question. And I _did_ tell you, remember"

Thessa looked from one to the other. "Maybe I should just leave you two alone for a while." She put her goblet down.

Loki made a _stay put_ wave. "Nonsense, darling. As a matter of fact, you may need to hear this."

Sif shook her head. "Not everything. I didn't expect that. Not the weaknessâ€¦ the _sickness_."

Loki frowned. "Yes. We don't often get ill here, do we? I did have to find a way to discourage people from using them again."

Sif snapped her fingers. "_Freya_! _That's_ the reason, isn't it? She's the Goddess of War. She's the one who used them before, _isn't_ she?"

Loki slammed a fist on the table. "_NO!_" Then his face cleared of the snarl. "No, she wasn't." For a moment, Thessa saw the shame and hurt in his face. "I was the one who used them. Only _me_." He sighed. "As the honest truth, Freya didn't relish the idea." He looked at Sif with a weak smile. "Less warriors for her, you see. She actually spoke against it. It's the one time in my life I should have

listened to her."

He looked sadly at Thessa. "As much as I would love to blame it on her, the crime was mine."

Sif pondered this. She was unaware that the mighty Loki had ever regretted anything.

While she was thinking, Loki turned back to her. "You want to speak to her, it can be arranged." He pointed to Thessa. "If she wants to help, she can."

Sif frowned. "How can she help? None of us can approach near the creatures."

Loki smiled as he pressed his hands together. "My dear Sif, you know how father makes his rules so absolute? Well, Thor and I spent our whole lives figuring out ways to sneak around them. And sometimes even I make mistakes.

He walked back and forth on the other side of the table. "When I cast the great magic over the last dragons, I accidently made a small error." He smiled at Sif. "Can you guess what it is?"

Sif thought for a minute in the quiet. She shook her head. "I don't see it. No one of Aasgard, except you, can approach a dragon." She shrugged. "Sounds simple and foolproof."

Loki raised a finger. "You didn't listen correctly. I said no one of Aasgard blood may approach."

Sif's head turned towards Thessa with a jerk. "You're a dead mortal."

Loki frowned. "That's the secret we must keep." He leaned over, both hands on the table. "Now here's all you have to do about it."

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Gothi was sitting on a stone, humming to herself. She felt unusually fit this morning.

Then she looked around. She was in the center of a large garden. It was set in a glen, with a small stream trickling through. She could swear she recognized the place.

But how did she get there?

She stood up. Then noticed that there was no pain, no creaking knees—just that one fluid standing motion she hadn't been able to perform for how many years?

She looked down. Her legs were strong again, the calves visible as the breeze blew her pale green skirt around. She held her hands in front of her face. They were smooth. The wrinkles and swollen joints were gone. Staring at one hand, she reached the other and pulled a lock of hair around. It was the soft, honey-gold of her youth.

What was happening? _

"Good morning."

She snapped around at the voice. A youngish man stood off to one side. The smile on his face hid some mischief. His face looked oddly familiar.

She held her young arms out to the man, waving them like an accusation.

He smiled. "This is how you are in your dreams, dear Gothi. I've seen it many times."

A dream then. _I can test that_. She worked her mouth.

"Who are you?" Her voice was the bell-like clarity of decades ago.

He smiled. "You don't know? You asked for guidance often."

A God then. "You're not Odin, by anything I can judge. And not Thor."

"But I have guided you more than any other."

She gasped at the realization. "_Loki_. What have you done to me?"

He laughed. "Why, nothing at all, my sweet. This is how I _always_ talk to you."

"No, it isn't. I've _never_ seenâ€|" She waved her arm in a circle. "â€|all this."

His face grew serious. "You will see many things anew, now. You have meddled in things beyond your understanding." He walked over and bent down to pluck a flower and sniff it. "We are in that part of your mind you visit when you ask for the Gods' guidance. Surely you can feel it."

Gothi thought about it. It was the familiar tingle she felt when the Gods answered her. "What was that magic?"

Loki rubbed his forehead. "It was not for _you_. It was not for anyâ€| _normal_ person."

"What do you mean, _normal_? Wasn't it for _Hiccup_? Hiccup is one of _us_. I brought him into this world."

Loki looked up, his eyes closed. "He was never _just_ one of you. You should have realized that before you chose him at the farce you call dragon training." He opened his eyes and looked closely at her face. "Just why _did_ you pick him, if I may ask?"

Gothi shrugged. "He was different enough to notice. Never had anyone gotten so skilled so quickly. And nobody noticed that he never used a weapon on them. He must have had a purpose."

Loki sighed. "Again, all the right things for all the wrong reasons. You never cease to amaze me."

Gothi looked around. The glade was becoming fuzzy around the edges. "_Wait_. Long agoâ€| Iâ€| had a man."

Loki smiled. "He died bravely, dear Gothi. He waits for you even now."

"What will happen to me now?"

Loki touched her arm. Clarity of her surroundings returned. "You have ensured that you will be present for important moments now. You often dream of your lost youth. _That_ is forever gone. But you have also asked to be released from your worldly husk because of the pain it holds. That is denied for a while longer. You will have one last grave decision to make. You will know when the time comes. Let that same feeling guide you then."

Gothi nodded. Everything got fuzzy again. "Butâ€|"

"_Gothi_! Gothi, you damn fool, wake _up_!"

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

It's only been two days, how is there so much stuff scattered? Astrid was stuffing gear back in the bags for their departure the next day. Tying off one bag, she walked back over towards the fire.

Hiccup was leaning back against the log. Toothless was lying next to him, head butted up against Hiccup's side. Hiccup had one hand idly scratching the dragon's neck as he stared unblinking into the large blaze in the middle of the clearing. The tip of the Night Fury's tail was swishing slowly.

She sat down beside him, looking over at the boy's face. His eyes seemed unfocused, staring at nothing.

After a while, she cleared her throat. Hiccup blinked, and slowly looked over at her.

"Sorry. Didn't hear you come up."

"I figured that out after the first ten minutes. Where were you?"

He opened his mouth a couple of times, then; "Nowhereâ€| everywhere. I'm not sure how to feel."

"About what?"

He sighed. "Everything."

"Even me?"

Hiccup smiled. "No. _That_ part's easy. Or at least, it's the easiest to figure out."

Astrid scooted closer to him and took his left hand in hers. "Well, then. I can help with the rest."

"You might not like it."

"I'm a big girl."

Hiccup pulled his left hand, still holding hers, up in front of his face. He stared at the slim, strong fingers wrapped around his. "This. Astrid, for years I've watched you. I always thought I was reallyâ€¦ inâ€¦ in love with you. Then I wondered if I was just in love withâ€¦ the _thought_ of you." He took a couple of breaths. "With my dadâ€¦ and the rest of the villageâ€¦ I wasn't sure if I had the slightest idea what love even was."

Astrid waited in the silence. Then she prompted; "Didn't we get that straightened out at your house the other night?"

He slowly nodded. "When everybody started talking to me, it scared me. I didn't know what to do, or say to them. I was afraid that pretty soon, they'd realize I was stillâ€¦ _me_â€¦ and everything would go back to normal."

Astrid gave his hand the slightest squeeze. "_Everything_?"

He wrapped her hand in both of his. "Everything. And you worried me most of all. It scared me that you were going to wake up this morning, and look at me, and wonder why you ever got involved with me."

Astrid shook her head. "I wish I could just beat it into your head." She stared at the fire. "I'm not used to feeling this, either. I don't even know what it _is_." She took a deep breath. "_But_â€¦ it feels good, and I'm sticking around to find out. Does that help?"

He lifted their hands, and lightly kissed the back of hers. A shiver ran down her back. "More than you know. Itâ€¦ it's the best start I could ever wish for."

There was a cry above. A dragon, a Nightmare by the sound, flew past their island high overhead. Astrid, with a lifetime of reflexes honed into her, reached her free hand over to the handle of her axe. Stormfly stirred a bit, opening her eyes and looking from Astrid to the sky, wary.

Hiccup turned, watching, and smiled. "I have my own personal Valkyrie now?"

Astrid jerked her head around to look into his face. _Valkyries_. Loki's warning came to her. _They want him. They want him dead._

She released her axe and pulled her hand from his. She grabbed the front of his vest and pulled him around. Since they were both sitting, the move surprised him, and he ended up half lying across her lap.

She pulled his face towards her and kissed him. _Hard_. Not an ordinary kiss this time, but one of pure possession.

She finally pulled her head back a few inches, both of them breathing heavily. She looked him in the eyes.

"Don't _ever_ call me that

again!"

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Freya slammed her fist on the table in anger. She had finished a long closed-door talk with Kara. The woman had practically been dancing when she came to see her.

The news _was_ goodâ€¦ in a way. It was informative; too much so, even. But it seems that every bit of news she gets just increases her frustration.

Since straight-up hunt-and-kill methods haven't been working, Kara and several others have been trying to gather information from those who oppose her. Kara's latest tidbit let her know that the stakes are getting higher. Thor, and that insufferable bitch he married are actively working against her.

But she has one little problem she needs to take care of. With Kara running around for Freya, _Thrud_ has been leading the searchesâ€¦ the searches that come up with nothing. This new information told her more about what must be going on behind the scenes.

Perhaps Kara should take Thrud on a private mission to Midgard. And the young upstart might have an accident of some kindâ€¦ _fatal_, of course. Too bad, because the girl held so much promise.

Because Thrud's mother, _Sif_, is in this up to her breastplate.

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Augst walked into the kitchen. "Vigdis, we need to talk about this."

His wife turned around from where she was preparing his favorite supper; fish fillets breaded in flour, with a bit of the spice he liked. "I know. I wanted to thank you."

He frowned. "Thankâ€¦ _me_?"

She walked over and straightened his vest. "Why not? You played your part so well. I told you what you had to do and you did itâ€¦ _and_ you got to keep your pride." She kissed him and went back to preparing supper.

Augst thought a secondâ€¦ _respect and affection from his wife_â€¦ maybe this wasn't the best time to start a big fight. He came and sat down at the table. "But you _had_ to have set the whole thing up with the Chief."

She nodded. "Somewhat. But you haven't listened to the years she has complained about that Snotlout. I know your first marriage was arranged. You've made it known quite well about that. But mine wasâ€¦ _different_. I swore my daughter would have a choice if there was any way I could."

She took the pieces of prepared fish, stuck them with metal skewers, and went to put them in the fire blazing in the hearth. She came back into the room. "We were good friends before we married, even though I

don't think either of us was truly in love." She put a hand on his shoulder and looked into his eyes. "But I've come to think weâ€¦ do veryâ€¦ well together."

She leaned over with both hands on his shoulders. "You knew that the village wasn't going to let anything bad happen to the boy that saved us all, didn't you? After all he went through, I knew Stoick wouldn't let any harm come to him."

She smiled. "You played the angry father to perfection. Nobody can say that Augst Hofferson backed down by choice."

He smiled a bit. Maybe he could make do with this. "Iâ€¦ I did, didn't I?"

Vigdis nodded. "Let him think he won. And, if Hiccup and Astrid do get officially betrothed, we can slowly forgive him. We can do that for our daughter's happiness can't we?"

He thought. "Yes. Yes! We can talk over a few mugs, and I can forgive him for his tricks."

She leaned over and softly kissed him. "Supper is ready in five minutes. Go clean up."

She watched him walk out to the water barrel. He had a small smile, and seemed lost in thought.

She smiled. Mulch might be Berk's best fisherman, but right now she could tell him a thing or two about playing one on the line.

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Stoick, his face smudged with soot, threw down the bucket. A last bit of water splashed out. "Who, in their right mind, would give a Zippleback to the twins?" Then he remembered. Thor help us._

Berta walked up to the small group. "No injuries, Chief."

"Thank Odin for small favors."

Gobber still smiled. "I d'no, Stoick. I think we learned somethin' there."

Stoick glared at his friend.

Gobber went on; "You been talkin' abou' how the beasts can help defend us, you an' Fishlegs. I think we just saw how to do it."

Fishlegs, still slightly smoking, chimed in. "He's right, sir. That tactic would be greatly effective against an Outcast ship."

Stoick still smoldered, figuratively and literally. "What did Bucket say about his shed?"

Gobber answered that. "He and Mulch went fishin' on the west shore. The current doesn't let the water freeze there. They're likely gone a

few days."

Stoick looked around at the others. "Hmmm. Gobber, get the twins and have them fixâ€| or more likelyâ€| rebuild that shed. No more dragons 'til that's done. Fishlegs, find a way to do what they tried in a _safe_ way, mind you."

"Yes, sir. I'd really need Hiccup for that, sir."

Stoick looked in the direction he saw his son fly off a few days ago. "Aye. We all do, boy."

Gobber tapped Fishlegs on the shoulder. "Come with me, lad. I've got a few ideas meself." The two of them walked towards the forge. "An' since they won't be needin' their Zippleback, we can justâ€|"

Berta watched the pair leave, and then looked up at Stoick. "I'd better follow them, Chief."

"You do that, lass. And _don't_ forget your bag."

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It was getting late. Hiccup and Astrid, their dragons curled by their sides, sat near the blazing fire and traded small talk. Astrid had filled him in on everything that had happened during the week he was asleep.

"â€|but mostly, we just waited for you to come back."

"And you guys and dad did all that for the dragons while I slept. Wow."

Astrid held his hand tighter. "Hiccupâ€| weâ€| I meanâ€| your dad didn't do it for the dragons. He did it for you."

He didn't respond to that, so she went on. "Everybody was worried about youâ€| and then people started feeling guiltyâ€| and your dad was sick with the waitingâ€| and, well, stuff just started happening. We wanted you to see something you wanted when you woke up."

"Like Ruffnut in a dress?"

"_Don't_ go there, Haddock."

"And I didn't get _any_ yak pot pie at _all_. Dad told me. He said he didn't want it to spoil."

"I'm warning you."

"Tuffnut said the women were just going to line up and-"

"That's _it_!" Astrid shoved him over on his back, pinning him to the ground.

"You didn't hit me."

"Wastes too much time." Then her lips were on his. She still held his hands down, as _if_ he was going to struggle.

When she pulled back a few inches, he stared into her icy blue eyes. "You can't really be _jealous_â€¦ not aboutâ€¦ _me_."

She frowned. "Yes I _can_. You seem to forget you saved my _life_ during the battle. I can worry until Iâ€¦ I've _proven_ to you I deserve you."

"Well, I know how you can start."

She narrowed her gaze at him. "_Oh_? And _how_?"

"You could shift a little. Those spikes in your skirt are numbing my leg. And it's the last one I have."

She put weight on her knees and shifted. "_Hmmp_". I didn't complain about your dagger sticking me."

"Astridâ€¦ Iâ€¦ ummâ€¦ maybeâ€¦"

"What?"

"Iâ€¦ uhâ€¦ wear my dagger on the side."

Her eyes got wide and her mouth closed to a flat line. She sat up and moved back. "Sorry." His face was red, and she was sure hers was glowing like a Monstrous Nightmare. "I meanâ€¦ _sorry_ aboutâ€¦ I didn't want to make it hard on youâ€¦ I meanâ€¦ _not_â€¦" She jumped up and turned. "_Oh_, _Gods_, I'm going to bed now before I open my mouth again."

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Hours later, the camp was quiet, with the exception of Stormfly putting another log on the fire. Toothless was nodding off when both dragons turned to look at the pale blue glow from the other side of the clearing.

17. Visiting the family

****Visiting the Family.****

Hiccup had no idea what great role luck had played in his life. His whole idea of making friends with a dragon started with almost being killed. And he had no clue why that didn't happen.

When Loki cast the great magic over the last dragons, ensuring that Asgard would never use them as fodder for war again, he imprinted part of himself on the beastsâ€¦ every last one, and all their future offspring, forever.

Was it a _smell_? A piece of his _soul_? Something _else_? Only Loki could tell you.

When Hiccup cut the Night Fury loose, it was almost his last act on Midgard. The dragon, knowing himself to be helpless and about to die, was suddenly _free_, and enraged at this puny human. Hiccup's life was about to end in a fiery blast and white gnashing teeth.

_But_â€|

The dragon sensed _Him_. Faint, diluted, faded with the passing of generationsâ€| but it was _Him_. _Him_ and _not_ _Him_. The dragon was confused. But he could not hurt _Him_. _Him_ was good. _Him_ was the protector. So instead, he left.

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The dragons merely sniffed the air, the sense of _Him_ keeping them calm.

Loki smiled. "Good evening, my beauties." He held out his hand behind him without looking away. A smaller hand grasped it.

"They're beautiful!" The other voice exclaimed.

"Yes. Aren't they?" Loki pulled the woman up beside him, standing in front of the Night Fury and the Nadder, both relaxed and staring with curiosity.

Loki released the woman's hand and bowed lightly. "My friends, I would like you to meet my wife. This is Thessa, and I want you to watch her well."

Thessa stood there in front of the dragons. "Ummmm, hi?"

Toothless took the lead in slowly stretching his neck out to sniff the woman. The smell of _Him_ was around her. But there was a sense of something else, also. Toothless' eyes widened at the sense of the _not_ Him_, the same as Hiccup. He looked to Loki, a small noise in his throat.

Loki reached out and stroked the warm, scaly nose. "That's right, fierce one. She's _family_. But you know that smell, don't you?"

Toothless turned and sniffed the woman, getting a bit familiar, but Thessa only smiled. Toothless finally _wuffed_ and sat back. Stormfly warily approached and did the same.

"Which one is his?"

"The black one. See the tail? Our descendant is both brave _and_ clever."

"I want to talk to him. _Meet_ him. _See_ what our blood has made after all these years."

"There may be a way later, my darling. But he needs to be left to his own devices for a while longer."

"Do you think Sif is ready yet?"

"She should be. Go now. And remember, we don't have all night."

Thessa turned, and pulled the hood of her cloak over her head. She walked towards the tents on the side of the

clearing.

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Josef Suleiman sighed and rubbed his forehead. He was an explorer at heart, but a merchant by necessity. His family traded all over the known world. Ships would be gone for many months at a time. Back in Judea, his family's warehouses held exotic goods from everywhere.

Exotic _locally_, that is. The good business sense was in procuring items usableâ€| commonly used, even. But just different enough to catch the eye. The family fortune had not been built on gold goblets, or stones set in jewelry, but more simple things, such as soft blankets in a strange pattern, or a different color of wool.

Josef looked out over the dark sky one last time tonight. Since the Roman withdrawal from Judea, the seas were more open, and there were fewer taxes. After centuries, stories still abounded about the iron-handed Roman rule that enslaved most of the known world. But after the second sacking of Rome, there was nothing to pay their mercenary legions with, so they had left.

That taste of freedom had started another bad time. What happens when a unit of over a thousand well-trained and well-equipped soldiers is suddenly told there is no money, no food, no transportâ€| and their services are no longer needed? Looting and murderâ€| _that's_ what.

Josef's grandfather died in the final battle to end that threat. And it had repeated itself in a dozen provinces. Towards the end, the Judeans had worn strips of colored cloth to tell the two sides apart. By that time, the Judeans had equipped themselves with the weapons, armor, helmetsâ€| even the sandals of the dead Romans.

He had seen Rome in the past months. A pitiful shell of its former glory. Buildings that were the pride of the Empire now falling into ruin. That had made Josef smile, thinking perhaps there was justice after all.

And now, sailing northward, he searched for new markets, new people, new placesâ€| yes, new places. He had dealt with the Franks, he had dealt with the Anglos in that riotous place they called England. He had met warily with the Celts, in a land which still held scattered Viking colonies.

He now headed towards the Northern area of the Highlands. He still hoped to fill his hold with tradable goods, but many of these people had hardly enough for themselves, much less to sell at any price. This trip, to seek out new markets and new goods, would hardly cover the cost of the food the men, some which were family members, had eaten on the voyage.

The only good thing was the enormous advancements made on the maps and charts. These themselves were worth much to merchants and traders. He had also made meticulous notes on ports, cities, and the best items to look for in each.

He was tired and ready for sleep as he closed the door behind him in his cabin.

But turning, he saw the shadow sitting in the chair behind his table.

"What are you doing here? Who are you? _David_?" He squinted in the dim light to try to identify the trespasser. He was not afraid, since they had been at open sea for some time, and whoever it was, they probably just wanted a secret talk.

"No. Please do not be afraid. I wish to strike a bargain with you."

Josef considered. _Not a member of the crew, then_. A _danger_? One loud shout would bring his crew rushing in, but he paused. The voice was soft, melodious even. Well educated, by the sound. And the trader in him perked at the word _bargain_.

"I would wonder how you boarded the ship. A stowaway, perhaps?"

"Notâ€¦| _quite_."

"You mentioned a deal."

"Yes, good Captain. You go North. I would like it if you went a bit _farther_ North that you would have."

"Interesting. But how could you know how far I would travel?"

"I know. But at least hear my offer."

"May we have more light?"

"Not right now, please. Sit, why don't you."

Josef sat in the chair in front of his table. He waited, intrigued.

"I wish you to sail six days North by Northeast of the Highlands."

Josef laughed; "I can do no such thing! The ice is treacherous. It would be _months_ before I would risk those waters."

"That's what I mean."

"I don't follow you."

The shadowed figure shifted. "I come to you now to commission you to be at a certain place on a particular day. The day of the equinox, to be exact. The reason for this isâ€¦| _personal_."

There was a clinking sound as a small, rounded purse struck the tabletop. "There is a payment for your agreement. I will also bequeath to you some very valuable charts and information, as well."

The man leaned forward just a bit, enough that Josef caught a glimpse of eyes that almost looked as if they were glowing. It must have been a trick of the moonlight through the aft window. "I also promise you

an adventure, and sights never before seen by your people."

Josef waved to the purse. The merchant in him could tell by sound the weight of the metal within. "Silver or gold?"

"Gold. And more will come when you complete the task." A bundle of parchment emerged from the shadows.

Josef reached out and took it. He unfolded the chart, skimmed the indicated route. He then began reading the accompanying notes.

"But this saysâ€¦ this is _months_ from now!"

"Yes, that's what I meant."

"Buy _why_?"

"Why?"

"Why come to me now? Or _ever_? Why not wait until nearer this appointed time you say?"

The figure sighed. "I cannot go everywhere unnoticed when I desire. This was an opportunity I could not waste."

Aha! Josef squinted at the man. "If you are worried about _others_, then there is much danger involved, _yes_?"

"A little. Some fighting, perhaps."

Josef stroked his beard, thinking. "I cannot understand. You offer me more gold than any trading voyage would earn. You warn me of danger. _Surely_ one who commands a ship of war, like the Romans, would be better for this." He threw up his hands. "And the whole thing is months away! Why do you not consider I will just take your gold and return to my home?"

Josef could almost feel the smile from the other man. "From others, I would. I _know_ you, Josef. I know you are a ruthless merchant, but deal fairly. I know you have men aboard who would not cringe from a little fighting. And most of all, I know that you have never, _ever_ gone back on your word when it is given. I cannot promise you business your way, but I give you adventure and a new land."

"In return for _what_?"

"A simple task. A _delivery_. I do _not_ send you to your death."

"What could this possibly be, to be worth so _much_ to you?"

"It is only the fact that thisâ€¦ _item_â€¦ cannot be tied to myself. Others could be very angry."

Josef considered everything that had been said. "I will wish to consult my cousin, and others of the crew."

"I hold you to nothing. Your arrival at the place and time will be your answer."

"You take a large risk, my friend. I have the gold, and risk nothing."

"You have a cask of very good wine in that cabinet. Perhaps we could have a drink on the deal?"

Josef smiled. "Yes. That sounds splendid!" He got up and opened the cabinet against the other wall.

He turned around. "Wait! How did you know about-

The chair behind the table was empty. Josef looked around, then went to light the lantern. Still alone. He walked over to the table to find papers and small bags lying on the table. Sitting down, in his own chair this time, he read everything. Several times. Then smiled and shook his head. This was no innocent stranger. But could any plan that required such secrecy truly be that simple?

He pulled the string and poured some of the gold into his hand. Roman gold. He shrugged. The same gold had been shifted from hand to hand for a thousand years. He held one coin up to the light.

Claudius? He looked closer. The coins were new, as if they had just been minted. Yet they had the face and numbers of a man dead seven hundred years. Who has so much gold that they can leave it lying around for so long?

He read the papers. He scanned the charts. There were even maps that included the stars and their positions.

After several hours, he rubbed his eyes. The sky was lightening. He slowly stood up to walk to the helm. He needed to wake his cousin. They would need to turn around, back to that large Frankish port. There were things he needed there. Then maybe time for a stop home. Mikael and his brother would enjoy an adventurous journey.

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Astrid was dreaming again. She stirred fitfully. Fire. Blood. Dragons. Had the war started again?

A hand shook her shoulder. She cracked open her eyes. It was still dark.

"Go away, Hiccup. I'm not in that big of a hurry to leave." Then the thought crossed her mind that Hiccup had come for another reason.

The hand shook her again. "Come with me."

Forget that thought, then. Now Astrid was awake. Another voice on a deserted island? She sat up quickly, turning to face the intruder. She paused for a moment, considering the situation.

"You aren't here to kill me, or you wouldn't have woken me, would you?" After a lifetime of dragon raids, she got her bearings quickly. That, and the fact that the dragons must have judged this person safe. Stormfly would have caught the scent of danger immediately.

She looked at the figure in the long cloak, kneeling in her tent. The voice told her _female_. The hood cast the face in shadow. They sat there staring at each other for a minute. Astrid had the feeling she was being _examined_, somehow. To sneak up on her, awake or asleep, wasn't easy.

The woman backed out of the tent slowly, beckoning her to follow. Well aware of her last night visit, she warily left the tent to stand in front of her.

The other woman pointed at the tent. "Your axe, girl."

Bristling just a bit, Astrid reached in and grabbed her axe. When she stood back up, the hooded figure was at the edge of the woods, waving her on.

Astrid followed the cloaked woman through the woods, along what must have been some sort of game trail.

"_So_. Who are you from?"

Silence.

"Anybody I know of?" Was this one of the '_mortal issues'_ Loki talked about? And why was she told to bring her axe? She gripped the handle tighter.

Farther on, she noticed a soft glow from between some trees ahead. It got brighter as they got closer. Soon they stood at the edge of a clearing. It was a circle in the woods. Nothing unusual, except that in every tree around the edge, a metal spike had been placed. Each spike held an odd looking torch in it. There was quite a lot of light.

Astrid looked at her guide, who merely indicated the clearing with a sweep of her arm, then stepped back into the shadows.

Astrid hoisted her axe to hold it across her body, grip tight. She was curious, yes. But she was also a bit fearful. This was no amateur thing, to get past the dragons, sneak up on her, and prepare this area for _what_?

She stepped out into the clearing and looked around. If someone had wanted her dead that bad, they wouldn't have gone through this much trouble. That woman could have just slit her throat and been done with it.

She was slowly turning when the corner of her eye saw movement. She quickly turned towards it. Her eye widened.

Tall, beautiful, and wearing a white tunic of some flowing material. Her hair hung down her back, tied with a few simple strips. She had a silver chest plate, and a bracer of metal on her left arm with a kind of small shield attached. Her right hand held an impossibly thin, long spear.

She also had the grin of a predator.

Astrid crouched slightly, holding her axe out a bit, unsure what the

next step was, but she bet the strange woman wasn't about to offer her a mug of ale.

They looked each other over, the young shield maiden and the muscled warrior. Finally the silence was broken when the woman pointed with her left hand at Astrid.

"_ASTRID_!"

Astrid stepped back. _What's with the yelling?_

"_YOU ARE ASTRID_!"

Astrid, confused, nodded.

The woman smiled, and began this weird combination of gestures and shouting. She pointed back and forth between the two several times.

"_YOU! AND! I!_"

Then she took her hand and imitated a set of jaws, opening and closing.

"_NEED! TO! TALK!_"

Astrid sighed. "We'll be here all night if we have to do _that_."

The other woman tilted her head with a frown. "_Wait_â€| you can talk normally?"

Astrid risked a smile. "_Yeah_. Been doing it for years."

The woman still looked confused. "But she _said_â€| I take it you don't have bugs, either."

Now it was Astrid's turn to screw up her face. "_Bugs_? Just _who_ have you been talking to?"

"That's what the pretty one said."

"The preâ€| okay, I'm not as obsessed with myself like Snotlout is, but _I'm_ the pretty oneâ€| just ask _Hiccup_." Astrid pointed back towards the camp. "And just _who_ do you think is the _pretty_ _one_?"

The woman held her hand up to about her shoulder. "So high. Blonde. Not _too_ shabby with a spear. Strong jawline. Friend of yours."

Astrid's eyebrows rose. "_Ruffnut_? _She_ told you to _shout_ at me?"

"Well, she did mention you were a bit slow."

"And had bugs."

"And you might be a bit ugly."

"The way this is going, I'm not sure about the _friend_ part either."

The woman smiled. "Well, I'm glad we got that all straightened out."

"All _what_? I still don't know wha-"

Her comment was cut short as she jerked her whole body to the side, stumbling. She just managed to avoid having a spear through her heart.

Using her arm to stop her fall, her legs kept moving. She stood upright and spun to face her opponent, several steps away. She didn't have any time to think, as the woman had taken several long strides forward, the spear in both hands.

The spear shot towards her chest again. Astrid swung the axe around and barely blocked it. The clang of metal rang through the woods.

"_HICCUP!_" She yelled as loud as she could. But the other woman just smiled.

The strategy was simply Astrid trying to keep away from the other, needing the room to dodge or block those incredibly fast spear jabs. But she knew she could only be lucky for so long. She quit yelling, because it wasted too much effort. Either Hiccup was sound asleep, or somebody used magic the same as on the beach. But that would mean more than mortals involved here, and Loki had promised help for that.

She felt a pain in her thigh. Slowing with her dodging, the spear had left a thin slice along her leg as she turned away from a thrust. She couldn't keep this up for long, now. She had to try, as Hiccup would say, something _crazy_.

Now, to note, very few women used an axe as a main weapon. A hammer uses its weight, and the force behind it, to cause damage to an enemy. Only the strongest use a war hammer as a standard weapon. There are exceptions, of course, since both Phlegma the Fierce and Big-Boobied Bertha were known to use a studded mace occasionally. But these were large, strong women. A war hammer often does not care if the enemy has a shield. A sword does, but a sword is more versatile in a changing situation.

One of the big differences in weapons is the ability to maneuver with them. A hammer is designed to make a mighty blow. In the right hands, it can shatter shield and man alike. A sword can slice, thrust, and block; a weapon with a balance for offense and defense.

An axe is somewhere in the middle. Heavy enough to cause great damage, but slower than a sword to recover in a situation requiring much movement. Once committed to a swing, it was closer to a hammer than a sword. Astrid had trained for years in the proper way to fight a _dragon_. That is greatly different than when up against a more nimble, intelligent opponent. She needed a new style, but didn't have the time to figure one out.

There was one chance, before her strength failed completely. She

watched the woman's feet, and how she shifted slightly before an attack. She tensed herself, gripping the axe as tightly as she could.

The spear started to go for Astrid's right side. As she shifted, it impossibly changed to a stab at her left side. Astrid had guessed right. After a quick jerk to the left, she stepped forward and swung her axe as hard as she could at chest level to the woman. As her foe leaned back, Astrid continued the swing, turning quickly while pulling down on the axe, trying to keep the blade angled correctly as she dropped, spinning.

The axe came around again quickly, trying to cut the woman off at the ankles, the axe a blur in the torchlight.

It almost worked. The woman slightly stumbled as she jumped back quickly. Then she looked down at her legs. On her right ankle, there was a thin red line, a single drop of blood leaking out one end.

Astrid was on her hands and knees, panting. She shook her head, unable to even lift her axe and stand. She looked up into the woman's face.

Who looked up from her scratch, and tightened her grip on the spear so hard Astrid heard it creak.

So that's it, then. Astrid, gasping, thought about Hiccup, and prayed to Thor for a quick trip to Valhalla.

Then the woman broke into a huge smile. She spun the spear around, and stabbed the point over a foot into the ground.

"_Splendid!_"

She stepped forward and held a hand out to Astrid. "You are quite _good_! Do you know how long it's been since a _mortal_ has marked me?"

Now Astrid was _really_ confused. But since it appeared she wasn't going to Valhalla just _yet_, she held up a shaking hand to the stranger.

She found herself pulled easily to her feet. Steadying herself, she stared into the smiling face.

"I don'tâ€¦| _what_ didâ€¦| _who are you_?" That seemed the best of the hundred questions she had.

The woman laughed, and put her hands on her hips. "I am the Lady Sif! Warrior of Asgard!" Then she leaned forward a bit, and said in a lesser voice; "I'm also the wife of Thor, but the pretty one said I shouldn't lean on his reputation so much."

Astrid got a bit of control back over her heart and her shaking body. "The same pretty one who told you I was stupid?"

"And that you had bugs."

"And you believed her."

Sif looked Astrid over. "Well, sometimes you can't be too sure about mortals. Their tastes do change over time. What people like is different every time I come to Midgard."

"When was the last time you were here?"

Sif counted on her fingers. "About seventyâ€¦ no, about ninety years ago." She glanced aside at Astrid. "And then, women all wanted a man with a big nose." She held her hand several inches in front of her own nose. "I mean, they all went crazy over the really big honkers. The legend was that that meant they had a really huge-

"I get it!" Astrid broke in. "Some women still say that." She was a bit pink in the face, and not just from the recent exercise. "And feet. Really long feet."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Is it true?"

Astrid raised her arms and let them flop against her sides. "How would I know?"

Sif made a pouty frown. "You mean you-" Then she smiled. "Ahhhh. One of those."

"One of those what, exactly?"

"Shield maidenâ€¦ probably dream of being a Valkyrie, am I right?"

Astrid frowned at the tone. "Maybe."

Sif shook her head. "You're not the type."

Astrid's frown got deeper. "And just what is that supposed to mean?"

Sif tilted her head. "Just that really attractive women don't strive so hard to be Valkyries."

"But- Why is that?"

Sif sighed. "Look. The big payoff to being a Valkyrie is that Freya awards the gift of eternal beauty. I mean, you should see some of the ones that go to Freya. Kara looked like a troll mated with a yak, but now she's on the Goddess level."

Sif whispered. "And most gorgeous women have a hard time with the 'no men' thing."

Astrid sighed. "I never used to worry about that part until just recently."

Sif smiled. "This Hiccup boy?"

Astrid nodded.

Sif smacked her on the shoulder. "Then claim him, now and forever."

"We're still trying to figure things out."

Sif tilted her head, brow furrowed. "Figure out? What is there to figure out?"

Astrid looked up. "Us. Everything." She looked down to her feet. "He doesn'tâ€¦ hasn't had a lot ofâ€¦ affection most of his life." She looked into Sif's eyes. "And I'm just as guilty as anyone else, damn it."

Sif sighed. "But, I was toldâ€¦" Sif bit her lip, frowning.

"Told what?" Astrid wanted some kind of answer for all this.

Sif scratched the side of her neck. "Well, Frigg seemed pretty sure about you twoâ€¦ so I expected, well, you to be a bitâ€¦ ahemâ€¦ further along."

Astrid felt her knees shaking again. Her brain started to blank out. "Frigg. Why would- what would sheâ€¦" Astrid got just a bit angry. "Don't I have a choice at all? About anything?"

Sif put her hands on Astrid's shoulders. "You don't understand things easily here on Midgard. You don't look far enough ahead. And sometimes, you fight what you know is right far too long than what is good for you."

Sif sighed. "Frigg sees things we don't. She can see all those things we keep hidden from the world, and even from ourselves. It's not Frigg you fightâ€¦ it's not even Hiccupâ€¦ It's you yourself."

"I don't deserve him."

"You are a fool, then. You are a fighter. It is said you are the best. If you deem yourself not worthy, who is?"

"But we all owe him so muchâ€¦ the villageâ€¦ our lives. How can I show-"

Sif shook the girl's shoulders. "How can you not! Are you not the courageous woman Frigg told me of? Are you not the warrior that Thor himself will answer? Are you not the one mortal that Loki trusted with his deepest secret?"

Sif pushed herself back with enough force that Astrid almost fell. "Loki gave you the task to protect him. But you do not run from that, do you? So to be with him does not sicken you, does it now?"

"No, butâ€¦" Astrid sighed heavily. "Okay, I'm notâ€¦ unhappyâ€¦ to be betrothed to him."

"Almost."

"Yeah."

"Somebody's going to have to fix that."

Astrid shrugged. "We're working on it." She looked off into the distance.

Sif turned towards the woods and let out a shrill whistle.

18. Why All This

****Why All This.****

Astrid followed Sif's gaze into the forest as the cloaked woman came out of the shadows to join them.

Sif nudged Astrid. "I think you two have met."

Astrid nodded. "Yeah. She's a real chatterbox. Couldn't get a word in edgewise."

Sif snickered. "She's the same way at home, too." She spoke to the newcomer. "Well?"

Thessa pulled back her hood. "Not bad. A bit slow. And she needs a lighter weapon." She looked Astrid in the eyes. "And she needs to remember all her options."

Astrid frowned back at her. "She didn't give me too many choices, here."

Thessa smiled. Her hand went to her side, and she was then holding a red-bladed slim dagger in her hand. "You are too easily distracted, girl. The right weapon can turn the battle."

Astrid's hand automatically pressed against her thigh. "Damn! I forgot all about it."

Thessa's hand seemed magically empty again. "You won't be given time to think in war."

Sif spoke up. "I can help her a bit there. She has the speed and the reflexes. She doesn't back down. That's a good start."

Astrid suddenly caught something. "Wait! You can't beâ€¦ you'reâ€¦ Th- Thessa?"

Thessa nodded with a smile. "Heard of me, then?"

Astrid's knees got shaky again. This was a night of myths and legends. She thought she was used to anything after talking with a God, but her breath started getting faster anyway.

Sif laughed at her frozen face. "Not everyone gets to meet the object of so many stories."

Astrid whispered. "It's all true, then. Loki said that youâ€¦ that he andâ€¦ um." She shut up.

Sif pouted. "I should be jealous. She wasn't that impressed with

me. Maybe I need a new introduction."

Thessa smiled and brushed her hand across Astrid's cheek. "I think it has more to do with my descendant than anything else." She leaned closer to Astrid's face. "Tell me, has he shown any _unusual_ family traits?"

Astrid took a deep breath. "Not _really_. I mean, outside of training the _deadliest_ dragon we know, and killing a giant monster that caused three _hundred_ years of war, he's just your average, clumsy, cute guy."

Thessa crossed her arms and smiled. "What about you? Do you love him?"

Astrid waved her arms around. "I don't know! _Maybe_. She stood still and thought. "I don't know _why_ I'm so confused about him." She stared back at Thessa. "But the thought of him with someone _else_ makes me so sick to my stomach I want to _kill_ something! So _maybe_ I do."

Sif and Thessa looked at each other and both nodded.

Astrid caught that. Her eyes went from one to the other several times. "Nowâ€¦ would somebody _please_ tell me what this is all about?"

Thessa raised an eyebrow. "Surely Loki explained it to you."

Astrid shrugged. "He told me about how some of you were trying to _prevent_ Ragnarok. He _told_ me about Freya. But what I don't get is why Freya seems to want to _cause_ it so badly."

Sif understood. "Ahhh, he didn't get to _that_ part."

Thessa looked at Sif. "I'm not very clear on that myself. Loki kept pretty quiet about a lot of things." She looked towards Astrid. "Claimed it was all for my safety. He didn't start explaining it all until after we got married."

Astrid froze. "Mâ€¦ _married_? _Loki_â€¦ and you?"

The other women both laughed. Sif spoke up. "Watch out for her. She's still on her honeymoon."

Thessa waved Sif off. "_Hmmp_". We've been practicing that part for a hundred years."

Sif leaned towards her. "Maybe I should check with the carpenter shop."

Thessa tilted her head. "Why?"

Sif smiled wider. "It used to be embarrassing, telling them we broke _another_ bed frame. Then they put in this real sturdy one that's lasted a while. I wonder if _you_-"

"That's _quite_ enough from _you_!" Thessa shot back.

Sif giggled. "And then after Frigg found out about youâ€¦ is it

true you can bend your legs all the way-

"_Excuse me!"_

Both of them looked at Astrid, hands on her hips, pink-faced. "Can we get back to the subject, please?"

Sif scratched the side of her neck. "_Darn_. Where were we?"

Thessa prompted; "Freya? Ragnarok? Ring a bell?"

Sif snapped her fingers. "Oh, that. Well, kids, how much do you know about the _rest_ of the prophesy? You know, the part _after_ Ragnarok?"

Thessa and Astrid exchanged a glance. Astrid shrugged. "The usual stuff. The world ends in war. Then later, there's a kind of new Midgard."

Sif nodded. "And then, after a time, Gods and mortals are reborn together."

Astrid nodded. "That part doesn't seem so bad."

Sif looked around with a frown. "But tell me _this_, mortals. You have Valhalla. But where, pray tell, does one of _Asgard_ go when they die, _hmmmm_?"

Everybody's eyes got big. Sif continued. "See, death is as much of a mystery to _us_ as it is the people of Midgard. There are a few, like you, who _know_ what to expect." She sighed. "But especially after the war of the nine realms, it became a question to us, too. We're not, _truly_, immortal."

Astrid thought about this. Was there some kind of _Valhalla_ afterlife for _Asgard_ itself?

Sif put a hand on Astrid's shoulder, and the other on Thessa's. "_Freya_ is the head of a group who thinks they can outsmart Ragnarok. Their belief is that they can hide, that they can hide out the war that will ravage several of the realms completely. Then she, the _only_ Goddess left, and her followers, will rule over _all_, forever."

Astrid was still confused. "Okay, I get that part. It's insane, but I _get_ it. But what has all this got to do with _Hiccup_?"

Sif sighed. "Freya has been cheating. In her attempts to hasten Ragnarok, she chooses lesser and lesser warriors for her halls. People talk. Some think she's losing her powers. There haven't been enough heroes for her purposes. The prophesy binds her until she has filled her halls."

She continued. "She wants her halls filled. Then she will _how_ did Loki put it?... _sit_ this one out in her hidey-hole_. When it's over, she _pops_ out and becomes ruler over a half-dozen realms."

Thessa put in; "Loki explained to me about the war with the dragons. Hiccup has prevented hundreds, maybe _many_ hundreds of warriors'

death in battles. These are all now empty seats."

Sif continued. "Hiccup is the greatest warrior to them since _Beowulf_. And Odin says he is not finished on Midgard yet."

Thessa added; "If he dies now, much of what he does, but more important, what he _will_ do will be undone. Freya will get many more souls in the future, and without his knowledge and actions, Ragnarok could happen."

Astrid was flustered. "Can't somebody just put an axe in her and be done with it?"

Sif nodded. "It _would_ be nice. But the Gods have more protection. If Mjolnir could finish her _that_ easily, sweetie would have done it long ago."

"Sweetie? _Sweetie_!?"

"Oh, please! Let's not start _that_ again."

Thessa reached out and rubbed Astrid's arm. "Loki feels that you are the best mortal to protect him while we try and find a way to stop her. You are close to him. And we will help when we can."

Astrid looked into Thessa's eyes. _The distant ancestor of Hiccup_. "And you _approve_ of me?"

Thessa smiled. "Like the daughter I never had. You'll be good for him. Keep him on his toes of the ones he's got left, anyway."

"About finished?", came another voice from the woods.

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Loki approached the group. To Astrid, he looked exactly as he had that night weeks ago on Dragon Island. He walked up and looked over the group.

"We have to go now." He said, wrapping an arm around Thessa, who leaned back into his shoulder.

Sif smiled. "Don't they make such a _cute_ couple?"

Loki smiled at Astrid. "Well, you've cleaned up a bit since I saw you last. Pretty enough to collect my-" He was stopped by an elbow driven sharply into his ribs.

"Don't scare her off." Thessa warned. "I like her."

Loki chuckled. "And if they get married, you'll be her great, great, great-"

"That's enough!"

"-great, _great_, great grandmother."

Astrid smiled. "A family gathering would really be something else, then." For a God of Darkness and Deceit, Loki was a nice man. There

were moments she could see bits of him in Hiccup, now that she knew what to look for.

Thessa stepped over and hugged Astrid. "Watch him, dear. _Love_ him."

Loki waved towards the path. "We'll keep the torches burning until you return to your tent."

Sif spoke up. "How about a week from now at that clearing of yours. I can give you a few pointers. But come alone."

Thessa reached into her cloak. "Wait a minute." She pulled out a small jar. Kneeling beside Astrid, she smeared something on the slice in her leg. "I brought this just in case. It's fromâ€¦| _home_, and it'll help."

Astrid had been ignoring the spear wound. She had had worse in dragon training. But she did appreciate the numbing warmth building in her thigh. "Thanks.", she said as Thessa stood and started to put the jar back in her cloak. Then she stopped, held the jar towards Astrid and winked. Astrid nodded as she accepted the gift.

Loki kissed his fingers. "Until next time, precious one."

Astrid walked over and picked up her axe, shouldering it. Her mind was so full right now, she could think of nothing more to say. She nodded and started down the path.

Loki sighed as Thessa walked over and put an arm around his waist. "Now she knows enough to be truly dangerous."

Sif stood behind them. "But she's no brittle flower, to break apart at the first breeze."

Thessa nodded. "But she's more fragile than she thinks. She feels deeper than she wants to admit."

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Hiccup stirred, not quite half awake. Had he just heard a dragon roar?

"Rrraaawwrrrrr!" That was a lot softer than your average dragon.

"RRRRrrraaaaaarrrrrrrrr!" That was more like it. He started to sit up, and reached for his other leg.

"Okay! Almost there. Now with _feeling_!" What in _Hel_ is going on?

"_RRRRrrrrraaaaawwwwwrrrrrrrrr_!"

"Got it!"

Hiccup stuck his head outside the tent. He blinked several times, and rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn't seeing things.

Toothless and Stormfly were standing off one side of the fire. They

were both upright, with Toothless on his hind legs. Both dragons had their wings spread in an aggressive display, and both of them had open-mouth bared teeth looks of fury on their faces.

But _that_ didn't shock him. It was _Astrid_, standing in front of them, crouched forward, arms extended, with a fierce grimace on her face. It looked like she was _taunting_ them. And she didn't have her spiked skirt, her shoulder pads, or even her axe.

As he started crawling from the tent, Toothless' face shifted his way. Astrid noticed this.

Hiccup crawled out, stood up, and brushed off his knees. Then he looked up, and stared, open-mouthed.

Both dragons were sitting quietly, wings folded. Astrid was standing there, legs crossed, arms behind her back, with her head tilted, the most wide-eyed, innocent look gazing back at him.

"Good morning, sleepyhead!" She chirped.

"Whâ€| what's going on here, Astrid?"

"We're just waiting for you to get up."

"That didn't look like waiting."

"Well, I thought I'd teach them to sing."

"Annnnd, _that_ was singing." Hiccup looked just a bit skeptical. "Iâ€| I know that look, Astrid. It's the one you use just before you wreak the Gods' own fury down on someone."

She walked over towards him, stopping just a few inches away. She grabbed his vest, and pulled them together to give him a kiss. After a few moments of his arms waving around, he gently placed them on her waist.

She finally pulled back a bit. "Wow. You touched me. You're improving, babe."

Hiccup flinched. "Did _you_â€| just call me-" He couldn't talk with her lips in the way again.

That one lasted long enough that when she pulled away, his eyes stayed closed a while. When they finally opened again, she was staring at him closely.

"You were saying?"

"Noth- nothing. Call me anything you want."

She brushed smooth the fur of his vest she had grabbed. "The fish are about cooked, and we need to pack up." She turned to walk to the fire, two fat fish on sticks propped on the ring of rocks.

"So, you alreadyâ€| _Astrid_!"

She turned back quickly, looking around. "_What_?"

He was pointing at her leg, where a round dark stain covered the side of her thigh. "Y- you- you're _hurt_!"

She looked down. "Oh, that's nothing. I justâ€¦ um, rolled over on my axe last night. My fault for keeping it in the fur with me."

Hiccup walked over and knelt beside her. "We need to treat it. What if it gets infected?" He looked around wildly. Let me take a look at it."

"HICCUP!" She said loudly, causing his head to snap up. She pulled him upright by the vest. "It's fine. _Really_. Hardly broke the skin. I'm not even limping. But if it makes you feel better, when we get to the Bog-Burglars I'll have it checked, okay?"

He looked a bit uneasy about it, but nodded.

"_Fine_." She said, walking to the fire. "Now, let's eat, and we can discuss you trying to get me out of my pants another time."

"Bu- bu- butâ€¦ that's _not_ whatâ€¦ Iâ€¦", Hiccup sputtered behind her.

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Berta was smiling.

Snotlout was lying on a bed in the Healer's House. He was lying on his stomach, his pants and undershorts pulled down to his ankles. Berta was massaging a foul-smelling, thick ointment onto his rear, which was practically glowing red.

Snotlout moaned. "This couldn't get any more embarrassing, could it?"

Berta laughed. "I've seen worse. You'll live, even if you have to eat standing up a while."

Then there was shouting from outside the door.

"Oh, come _on_, Gobber!" Ruffnut's voice rang clearly. "I've just _got_ to see that fried butt. We didn't get a good look with all the fire and smoke from his pants!"

Snotlout's eyes shot open. "I take it back. It could get a _lot_ more embarrassing!"

Berta tried to calm him. "Gobber will keep them away. Just what were you _doing_, anyway?"

"I was trying tricks like Astrid does. I was teaching Hookfang to catch fire on command."

"But isn't that something you should do when you're _not_ _sitting_ on him?"

"You know, I think I got _that_ figured out now, _thank_ you."

Berta sat back. "Well, that's done. You just lay here for a few hours. And no dragon riding for a few days."

"Yeah, I guessed _that_, too."

Berta stood up, wiping her hands on a cloth. "Maybe you _should_ let her in. She might be impressed. She likes a good battle scar."

"It's not exactly the kind you can show off in the Great Hall."

As Berta left the room, she turned and winked at him. "It probably wouldn't be a surprise, you know. The girls like to watch you bathe in the stream."

"But the water's really cold! They'd all think I haveâ€|" _Oh GODS! Maybe he could just have Hookfang eat him now._

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Astrid was thinking while they had an awkward breakfast. She was worried. Hiccup was impossibly easy to embarrass, and she wondered if she was taking advantage of that. There was a lot going on in her mind right now, and a lot of things to think about that nobody else knew. Hiccup could be distracted by a touch, a comment, or _especially_ a kiss. She had been using that redirect his curiosity sometimes.

Was she using him? She really had to inspect herself. What were the rules?

Was she trying to control him? _No_. Was she making him do things he wouldn't do otherwise? _No_. Was she trying to attract him by touching and kissing him?

Maybe.

One thing that was starting to amaze her, though, was the fact that she _liked_ it. She had never been one for running around thinking about boys. The peck on the cheek after that flight had been the first time she had ever deliberately walked up to any male and kissed them. And it wasn't bad, either.

Then, the morning he woke up, it was better.

It dawned on her, somehow, that in a way she was just as desperate for attention as he was. _His_ was a need for approval from the village, especially his father. She had public approval that Hiccup didn't. What she didn't have, though, was any kind of personal connection. Come to think of it, he hadn't either. She never thought about it much, after all, because she was a _Viking_! Maybe both of them had hidden away in their own little worlds being what everyone thought they were. But it was different. Astrid was respected and popular. To young men like Snotlout, she was a trophyâ€| something to be won in a contest.

But Hiccupâ€| _his_ attention towards her was _different_. Remembering their talks, he really paid attention to _her_ accomplishments. He had not blindly desired her, but cheered her on, and was even proud of what _she_ had done. Things he felt he couldn't do.

And while she ignored him, he went out to do so much more than she could imagine. And then he willingly shared with all of them. She felt once again the pain of her hatred of him in Dragon Training. She had wanted to beat out of him the very things he so wanted to give her.

Yep. This guy was something different, and she was going to enjoy figuring him out, if it took years.

But before all that, there was the immediate future. They were going to the Bog-Burglars, and she was going to have to leave him there, alone.

On an island full of women. Vicious, skilled, and almost all single. And she knew the stories around the Great Hall about why so many men liked going on the trade ships to their island.

She was torn between wanting to ensure his safety, and trying to talk him into just staying here alone. He would be safe enough, right? Toothless would be with him.

She sat back and sighed. "We need to talk."

She looked around to see Hiccup with a look of utter fear on his face.

She frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Is this going to hurt much?"

"Why would you- What do you think I'm going to do?"

"Gobber said if a woman says 'We need to talk', it means they're about to drop a hammer on you."

Astrid shook her head and smiled. "No, I'm just wait! Did you get all your information about women from Gobber? Really?"

Hiccup shrugged. "Yeah. Dad wasn't much on giving advice about life. Orders, he was great. Advice, not so much."

"Gobber. No wonder you act so weird around me. What else did he tell you?"

"I've been trying to sort it out. He says an awful lot I know is just pure dung. I just never had anything to compare it to."

"Like what?"

He smiled at her. "Well, if a woman attacks you with a knife, you should hand her some bread and meat. When she sees it, her female instincts will take over, and she will make you a sandwich."

Hiccup watched as Astrid doubled over, laughing loudly.

"Yeah, I took that one with a grain of salt."

Astrid pressed her hand against her side, trying to control her breathing. "Gods! Didn't your father ever tell you anything? Was

he the '_keep them_ _barefoot and pregnant'_ type?"

"No, he thought they should wear boots when they were pregnant. How _else_ could they go chop wood, hunt, fish, take care of the livestock and tend the garden?" He looked at her. She was red-faced, head pressed against her knees, laughing hard enough to start coughing. "Pretty sure that's not normal, either, is it?"

Astrid wiped tears away from her eyes. "Oh, some of that's normal for the _men_ to think, all right."

She put out a hand and laid it on his. "I'm so sorry. You've been fed all that crap and now you have to deal with me."

"That's okay. I like dealing with you. It's more fun now that you're a real person."

She froze. "Oh, Hiccup. Was I _that_ bad?"

"I didn't meanâ€¦ itâ€¦ that way. You were always a person. I meanâ€¦ I didn't _think_ of you like a- " He looked down. "I don't know how to dig myself out of that one."

She scooted closer to him. "I'm not going to make you suffer. I know what you mean. We _both_ have to get used to it, you know."

He tilted his head. "You?"

She lightly brushed his shoulder with a fist. "_I_ don't want to hit him anymore. Why is that?_" "You don't think I just kiss _anybody_, do you?"

He locked eyes with her. He slowly leaned towards her. She couldn't even blink as he came to within an inch of her nose.

"Well, I hope you cut out _some_ of the others, at least."

He smiled as he ducked, her fist missing him by just under an inch.

He laughed as she leaned forward, grabbing his vest. "_Oooooohhhh_, you are just getting _too_ confident, sir."

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Toothless moved his shoulders around, testing and settling the load. He looked at Hiccup and snorted lightly while Hiccup rubbed his side.

Astrid checked Stormfly's straps and walked over. "I think they're getting lazier by the day."

Hiccup smiled. "Believe it or not, that's normal."

"Huh?"

He continued. "Fishlegs was talking about what he read about predators. You know, bears, wolves, sharks. Anyway, the biggest and baddest are called the _apex_ predators. They're like, the absolute

top of the food chain. And I'll bet dragons are at the top of even _that_ list."

Hiccup stroked the warm side of the Night Fury. "Well, he told me about the fact that lots of predators only expend their energy hunting and killing food. The rest of the time they rest up for the next hunt, while putting on fat for the winter." He rubbed his dragon's nose. "I bet now that they have more food with less work, they'll put on weight."

Astrid looked at her Nadder. "Isn't that a bad thing?"

Hiccup shrugged. "Depends. Most predators with a stable food source will defend it. That might include Berk. Maybe they'll get bigger and stronger, since the Queen was taking all their food."

He looked at her. "Astrid, I just don't _know_. Everything I did was the first time, and it was scary. I don't know _what_ the long term effect of any of this is going to be. What if it blows up in my face?"

Astrid smiled. "I'm not worried in the least. You'll figure it out." She put her hands on his arms. "Now, one last thing before we go."

Hiccup stood there waiting.

She looked slightly away from his eyes. "Look. I'm just starting to get used to this _girl_ stuff, okay? With just you and me out here, I can think aboutâ€¦| _us_. And Berk kind of knows about us already, between your dad, and my mom, andâ€¦| pretty much everyone else."

She moved a bit closer. "But where we're goingâ€¦| Hiccup, they're _strangers_! And if it looks like I treat you different there, it's justâ€¦| I'm not used toâ€¦| this."

Hiccup nodded. "I can understand that. So we just act like friends there. Got it. I won't do anything embarrassing."

Astrid sighed. "But I don't want them to get any ideas, either. I won't _let_ one of them get their hands on you."

Hiccup tilted his head. "Soâ€¦| you want me to make sure they know we're togetherâ€¦| I can do that, I think."

She frowned. "But if they think we aren't a couple, I can find out what they might try to do."

"Okay."

"On the other hand, if we tell them we're betrothed, they might leave you alone."

"_Astrid_. Will you make up your _mind_? I'm getting dizzy here."

She leaned down slightly and gave him a soft kiss. "I'll have a plan when we get there." She smoothed his vest, and turned towards Stormfly. "Now that we've gotten _that_ straight, let's fly."

Hiccup turned to Toothless. "_What_ did we just get straight?"

Toothless just gave a confused warble as Hiccup mounted and they took off.

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A short while after they left, another visitor arrived. Not by boat, or even dragon, but on a beautiful white winged horse. It glided in and _clopped_ to a halt, looking around, while the rider on its back scanned the area.

The rider dismounted. She took in the abandoned camp. The smell of Loki's demons was still in the air. The horse fidgeted.

Kara stilled her with a touch. "Easy, girl. They're gone." They _had_ to be, or else she couldn't have approached.

_How can I catch them? _ She thought. Then she sensed something. Something very familiar.

Power has been used here. Subtle, but here nonetheless.

She looked to the sky. Thrud was tracking them to their next stop. This was the girl's last chance to bring useful information. Freya was having her suspicions about Sif's daughter, and her loyalties.

Kara did not like to even think anything against Freya. She had chosen Kara, trained her, and placed her in a position of great power. Kara did not like to think about the talk, the defection of followers, and _especially_ the lowering of standards.

Murderers and criminals in Valhalla. It hurt to think of it. And something must be done before Freya loses what she has spent thousands of years working for.

But how do you fight an enemy you can't approach?

She rubbed the horse's nose. "How can I help her?"

19. Meet the Neighbors

****Meet the neighbors.****

It wasn't far from their little island to the Bog-Burglars. Not quite a straight line from Berk, it was only about an hour away from their camp.

Their camp.

Hiccup made sure he got it right on his map. He really wanted to remember that place. Come to think of it, it was only the third time he had been away from Berk. And the _first_ time, he had almost been killed, when they discovered the nest. Also the _second_ time, even closer to dying while going after the Queen. So this time, which was the first _without_ almost getting himself killed, was something special.

And he got to spend the time with Astrid. He looked over at her now, flying just below and ahead of Toothless. He watched her braid, trailing behind her, whipping around in the wind. He noted that even now, she was training. She was performing small shifts, almost like she was dodging something, perfecting her control. She was the ideal Viking, completely the opposite of him, and he still was amazed that she cared for him.

Hiccup reached down and scratched the Night Fury's neck, getting a tiny shiver from Toothless. If it wasn't for one thing, Astrid would be better than him. He knew she would train, and practice, and practice some more, until she was the best. It was her way with everything. It was part of her.

But that one thing was Toothless. Maybe not just his friend, but dragons altogether. Hiccup didn't know how to explain it, or teach it, but he knew something was different about him, about both of them. He had noticed it right off. The other teens flew, yes. They flew quite well, Astrid the best of them, as usual.

But their flying was well normal. You couldn't call flying on giant reptiles normal very easily, but that's the way Hiccup looked at it. And watching the others a few days ago, he saw.

But flying on Toothless was different. The two of them seemed to almost merge in the sky. Hiccup wondered how that worked. The dragon could understand almost anything he said. Hiccup had gotten to the point that he could feel what Toothless was going to do to move the controls to the precise place that the dragon would need at that moment.

But how? Why could he understand these beautiful creatures better than the others? Was Toothless, or maybe Night Furies in general, that much smarter than other dragons? And then there was the morning he introduced the others to the dragons in the ring. For a while, they were skittish with the others, but every single dragon, once he had approached and been sniffed, was okay with him.

Hiccup was lying almost flat on Toothless, his arm dangling down as he idly scratched the Night Fury's neck. He was staring at the top of the ebony skull, almost as if he could see into the complex dragon brain inside. The Book of Dragons, now being severely updated, was a terrible reminder of how little they really knew about them.

And because of him Hiccup people were staking their lives on what he knew. That thought frightened him.

"HICCUP!"

Maybe he should talk to Astrid about it. There was something that just eluded him. Some tiny detail that ran away and hid around the corner whenever he got near.

"TOOTHLESS!"

There had to be something different about him. Like he wasn't different enough alrea-

Something bounced off Toothless's head and hit him in the chest. He

shook his head and looked ahead. It turned out _ahead_ was really _down_.

The water was rushing up quickly. His mind froze, then kicked into full speed, reverting back to his first flights on the then unstable Night Fury.

The dragon shook his head as Hiccup snapped out of it and leaned to the side, adjusted the controls, and tried to physically pull Toothless away. He felt the heavily muscled wings beat wildly, the tail whipping, trying to gain control.

The Night Fury's back arched as Toothless powered into a course change that brought them level with the ocean, with only a wingtip sending up a spray of water to the side. He increased his speed, climbing slightly, as the wobbling steadied out to a smooth, slower pace.

Hiccup looked around, finally coming back to the real world as his heart began to slow down. He looked over to see Astrid, a few feet to one side of him now; with a look on her face he couldn't really interpret, nor was he sure he wanted to try.

He _was_ pretty sure, though, that the mountain tip just peeking over the horizon now was their destination, but he needed to calm down and get his bearings. Spotting a nearby sea stack, which seemed big enough to accommodate the two dragons, he veered towards it. Toothless fluffed his wings out at an angle, and settled onto the edge with hardly a bump.

Hiccup slid down, his legs almost buckling under him. He leaned against the side of the heaving dragon. Behind him, he heard the scratching of Stormfly landing, followed by a lighter _thump_.

He turned around just in time for Astrid to grab his shoulders. Her head, and eyes, were darting here and there, checking him for some kind of injury.

"_What_ happened out there?"

Hiccup shrugged. "I wasâ€¦ thinking. Sorry."

Astrid dropped her arms, eyes narrowed into slits. "Thinking."

He nodded.

"About _what_, exactly?"

Hiccup rubbed the back of his neck, looking down from her face. "You _know_â€¦ dragonsâ€¦ girlsâ€¦ that sort of stuff."

"_Girls_."

"Well, not just _any_ girls."

"I seeâ€¦ _no_, I _don't_ see, Hiccup! Why would you fly Toothless into the ocean, for Thor's sake? _Why_?" She looked to the Night Fury resting beside him. "Is something wrong with him? A problem with your leg?"

He looked up into her face. "I didn't do it on purpose! I was just-"
He stopped.

It suddenly dawned on him; he had never told anyone all of the things he learned from Toothless. Astrid had gone on the ride with him instead of beating him up. And he had only taken enough time to teach everyone how to fly the day of the battle. Nobody but him knew these things.

"Umm, Astrid. It was my fault. It was an accident."

"Hiccup, what's going on here? This is weirder than your usual weird."

He sighed. "Okay. I was just scratching him, and got to thinking. I guess we both just nodded off."

"Flying high over the ocean in the middle of nowhere, and you two just decide to take a nap."

"It's not quite like that, Astrid." He walked over towards Stormfly, who cocked her head to watch him. "If you scratch a dragon in the right spot, they relax. That's what I was doing in Dragon Training."

He started scratching the side of Stormfly's chin.

"It's usually aboutâ€¦ here."

"Raawk!" *_thud_* Then there was a loud purring sound.

"See?"

He looked back to see Astrid standing there, wide-eyed, with her jaw hanging unhinged.

"That's how I took down the Nadder."

"And the Gronckle?"

He smiled. "No, that time I used the dragon nip."

Her head tilted. "Dragonâ€¦ nip?"

"Yeah. On one of ourâ€¦ tougher, ahem, landings, Toothless was rolling in this tall grass. You know, those little spots on the North Mountain? He was really having fun in it. So, I tried rubbing a little on the Gronckle's nose."

She had her arms crossed, staring at him. Some seconds passed in silence.

"Say something, Astrid."

She sighed and shook her head. "I don't know whether to hit you for beating me with those tricks, or kiss you for being a genius."

"Do I get a choice? Because I'd really prefer the-"

"_Wait a minute_! What about the Zippleback? You didn't touch it at all! You just sort of waved your arms at it."

"Eels."

"_WHAT_!?"

He smiled. "Eels. Most dragons hate eels. Toothless actually ran from one."

She stared at him. "Soâ€¦ you saw that, and then just decided to risk your _life_ testing it out. What if it hadn't worked?"

He shrugged lightly. "Then we probably wouldn't be having this talk."

She tromped up to him and hit him in the shoulder. "_Don't you dare!_ Don't you dare act soâ€¦ soâ€¦ damn _casual_ about it!"

He rubbed his shoulder. _That_ one was going to bruise. "_Astrid_! It's all in the _past_! Why are you getting so upset about it _now_?"

She stomped her foot and waved her arms around. "_Because_â€¦ because you're _YOU_! You get these ideas, and then you just _have_ to go _do_ it, and then you justâ€¦ you justâ€¦ go out and get _killed_!"

"I'll have you know I _haven't_ gotten killed. Not even _once_!"

She froze, turning towards him. "You know that doesn't make sense."

"Well, _you're_ not making sense either. I _know_, I've done a fewâ€¦ _slightly_ risky things."

Astrid snorted.

He went on. "But this is all new, Astrid. We're the first onesâ€¦ the _first!_... in seven generationsâ€¦ even _more_â€¦ to do something different! And it's for our own goodâ€¦ you, me, the whole tribeâ€¦ and Vikings everywhere! If we can help all of Midgard, isn't that _worth_ a little risk? _Huh_?"

Her answer was to go to him and wrap her arms around him.

"Hiccup, you idiot. You had to go and make me feel like a _girl_. I'm really new at this. I need a live boyfriend to practice on. A _live_ one, understand?"

"There's always Snot-"

"Finish that word and I pound you."

She leaned back a little. "I don't completely get it. You used to be soâ€¦ _skittish_. _Now_ you're as brave and foolhardy as any Viking I know."

"Thanks, I think."

"How did it happen? _Tell_ me."

Hiccup was beginning to understand _one_ thing about Astrid at least. When she used the words '_tell me_', it meant something to her. _Really_ meant something. And a joke wasn't going to get him out of it, either.

He stared straight into her eyes. "Astrid, I almost had my head bitten off by a Night Fury. I looked right down the throat of the biggest monster I could ever even _imagine_. I didn't pee my pants, and that's the only claim to bravery I can make. There's nothing _left_ for me to be frightened of."

He grabbed her arms. "Except _you_. You not needing me anymore. That's the only fear I have."

She moved closer again. "Then you don't have anything to be afraid of."

She held him again, more gently, and kissed him for some time.

Finally, she pulled back. He smiled at her.

She looked towards their destination, slightly flushed. "Maybe we should get going."

His hands had found her waist. "I'm not really in a big hurry right now."

She smiled, and gently stepped back. "Well, we could use a real meal. Maybe they even have beds for us there." She frowned. "How do we do this? Just fly in and say hello?"

He thought a second. "Dad said we could come here because they know about us and the dragons. I'd _like_ to assume that they won't just try to kill us on sight."

She smiled. "You have a Night Fury, remember. They'll just hide and pray you don't find them."

"I don't think sending them running for the hills is going to make us too many friends. I thought we'd just kind of glide around and let them see us. After we check out the welcoming committee, we can take it from there."

Astrid nodded. "So if they're hostile, we just take off back to our island. Sounds like a plan."

"Yeah. They're our allies, and we have a treaty, so I'd like to hold off blasting them. Dad wouldn't be too thrilled about that."

He tilted his head. "By the way, _what_ did you hit us with?"

Astrid laughed as she walked to Stormfly. "I'll have to tell Gobber that sack of dried mutton was good for _something_."

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Bertha was going over some village requests, and explaining to her daughter how to sort out priorities. You can't do everything at once, and Camicazi was learning that the project that did the most good for the most people got the best effort. Was the dock repair more important than the forge repair? In summer, yes, but there were several months before the ships would be going out again.

The door burst open. Indis stood in the doorway leaning against it. She was bent over, one hand on her knee, catching her breath.

"_Chief_!... _huff_â€¦ _Dragons_!"

Bertha and Camicazi shot to their feet. Bertha reached for her mace, while Camicazi grabbed the hilt of her short sword.

"A raid?" Bertha asked.

Indis shook her head. "People."

Bertha looked at her daughter. "Berk!"

Camicazi smiled. "Hiccup! It has to be him!"

Bertha shrugged. "We found out one important thing, now. Winter don't mean squat if you got dragons." She wasn't too happy about this. Everyone's strategy is going to have to change.

They all ran down the steps of the Chief's house. They saw the gathering of people looking up. More were streaming from the Great Hall and houses as the word spread. Bertha noted some had drawn swords and readied bows.

Bertha walked to the front of the group. "_HOLD IT!_ Put away your weapons! Anybody, and I mean anybody who threatens theseâ€¦ errrâ€¦ people-"

"_And_ their dragons!" Threw in Camicazi.

"Fine. AND their dragons will be shipped off! Get me?"

Lots of mumbling ensued, but they seemed to get the point.

The dragons, two of them, got lower. Obviously, they were checking the place out.

Camicazi tugged on her Mother's sleeve. "The black one! Mom, that's got to be the Night Fury!"

Bertha nodded absently as she watched the two dragons. One of them was a Nadder, ridden by someone who kept swerving from side to side, looking around. Good defensive tactic, she noted. The other, a frightening black creature, glided in a slow circle.

Camicazi was jumping up and down on the balls of her feet. "_Oooohhhh_, this isn't getting us anywhere."

She took off running for the clearing ahead. Bertha put out a hand to stop her, but she was already past. In the clearing, she began

jumping and waving both arms.

The black dragon aimed for the clearing and began dropping, the Nadder circling just over it. With an angling of the wings, and a large blast of air, blowing Camicazi's hair back, it settled a short distance in front of her. The Nadder changed course and curved in to land just beside it.

Camicazi's heart thudded painfully in her chest. Yes, it was Hiccup, and yes, she was just feet away from the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself, but she knew, somehow, that Hiccup wouldn't let her be hurt. No fear, she thought. What beautiful eyes, she thought as the Night Fury looked at her. Then her eyes swept up to Hiccup, staring at her from atop the dragon.

The dragons were still, sniffing, and feeling the array of emotion radiating from the large group of strangers. Toothless felt a total lack of hostility from the little one in front of him. There was a mixed bag of fear, sweat, and wonder from the large group farther down the hill. He also read mixed feelings from Hiccup.

Astrid slid from Stormfly's back and walked up even with the dragons' heads. She looked from Hiccup to Camicazi. Neither of those two had moved. "Well? Did we come here just to have a staring contest?" That came out a bit harsher than she intended.

Hiccup seemed to come to himself, and dismounted the dragon. He walked up to Camicazi, smiling, while scratching the side of Toothless's neck with one hand.

"Um, hi?"

She smiled back. Then she crossed her arms over her chest and tried to look mad. "Humph. Took you long enough."

Hiccup remembered their last conversation vividly. "Yeah, well, I got a bit busy for a while there." Then he looked over to Astrid. "Oh, Astrid, this is Camicazi."

Astrid walked closer. "I know. Daughter of Chief Bertha, heir to the Bog-Burglars, greatest thief in the archipelago, and so forth." She tried to keep the sarcasm out of her voice for Hiccup's sake.

Camicazi gave her an intense gaze. "Astrid, huh? Last time we met, I only knew you as frowny-girl."

Astrid backed down just a bit. "Well, it was a different time, then."

"But not a different Hiccup." Camicazi was either asking a question or making a point.

Astrid glanced down. Ouch. "No."

Bertha was watching closely, and thought it was time to step in. She started up the slope, Indis one step behind.

Watching them approach, Astrid stood a step downslope from the others. She raised her arm towards Hiccup, and took a deep

breath.

"_Chief Bertha!_ I present Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third!
Dragon master of Berk!"_

On cue, Toothless and Stormfly rose high up, spreading their wings and letting out a huge roar.

Most of the tribe either fell towards the ground or started drawing weapons, or both. Bertha froze mid-step. Camicazi fell forward, her elbows in the dirt.

What Camicazi thought unusual, though, was she was still looking into Hiccup's face, confused and looking around. _HE_ had hit the ground with everyone else.

Hiccup looked at his dragon, who smiled back at him, relaxing his wings. Getting up, and extending a hand to Camicazi, he saw Astrid standing there, again with the innocent look.

Hiccup frowned. "Excuse me a minute, please." He muttered to Camicazi. He walked over, lightly grabbed Astrid by the arm, and pulled her back between the two dragons, both relaxed and settled again.

"_Astrid_! What are you _doing_?" He kept his voice as low as he could.

Hiccup, you're a _hero_. You _need_ a proper introduction. I learned about it fromâ€¦ uh, _friend_."

He stuck his head out around Toothless's neck to glance at the Chief and her daughter standing there. He turned back to Astrid. "Well, _stop_ that! We need these people to _like_ us. Or, at least not run away. Justâ€¦ just let me be _me_, Astrid. Don't make me out to be some kind of dragon Lord."

Astrid snapped her fingers. "Damn, I wish I'd thought of that. _Dragon Lord_ sounds way more cool. We'll use that next time."

Bertha and Camicazi looked at each other at the heated, but whispered discussion going on. They both shrugged.

"_Next_ time? Keep doing that and there won't _be_ a next time. She liked me _last_ time!"

"_She_? I thought we already decided who your girlfriend was."

"Astrid, it's not â€¦ _girlfriend_ thing. Besides Gobber, she was the first person who acted like they _liked_ me, okay? Let's not make any enemies here."

He stuck his head back out to look at Bertha. "Just another minute. Sorry. You know, protocol stuff."

He swerved back towards Astrid. "Look, we sent a few letters back and forth."

Astrid raised an eyebrow. "Love letters? _Poems_?" She stretched that last word out.

He shook his head. "Of _course_ not! Just stuff like; 'Hi, steal anything interesting?' or; 'No, did you burn any more houses?'. Just _stuff_. But it was the closest thing I had to a _friend_ for three years! I need you to work with me here, Astrid."

Her face fell. She didn't like being reminded of his life before Toothless. "I'll work with _you_ anytime. I just don't think we should blindly trust anyone _else_ so soon."

Camicazi smiled and cleared her throat loudly. "_Ahem_! Hey, guys, can you at least tell us if the dragons are going to eat anybody?" Bertha rolled her eyes at her daughter.

Hiccup pointed an arm. "_See_? Now promise me no more scary dragons."

"She doesn't sound very scared."

"Astrid?"

She pouted. "_Okay_. I promise."

Hiccup looked up into Toothless's face, turned towards him. "And _you_. Quit being such a pushover for anybody with a fish." Toothless gave him back an innocent look. Nothing seemed out of place to the Night Fury. These strange humans had shown proper fear and respect, and he had gotten some nice cod out of the deal.

Hiccup stepped back in front of the dragons, grinning sheepishly. "_Ummm_, sorry about that. Astrid was just a bit carried away. No, nobody's going to eat anyone." He just stood there.

Camicazi crossed her arms with a smile. "Dragon master, huh?"

Hiccup rubbed the back of his head, looking down a bit. "_Trainer_. Dragon trainer."

Bertha spoke up, deliberately ignoring the staring eyes of the dragons. Despite Hiccup's reassurance, and despite the cold, she was sweating. "Well, _whatever_ you decide to call yourself, welcome, young Haddock. If you'd like some food and drink, come with us to the Hall, _but_, it'll cost you a story." She stuck out an arm, which Hiccup clasped with a sheepish grin.

Camicazi stepped up and took one of his hands. "And I bet it's a _good_ one." She noticed the narrowing of Astrid's eyes. "_Hmmm_. A bit possessive_, _that one._"

As they walked down the hill, with the rest of the tribe brushing off their clothes, Camicazi held his arm. Just to keep him from slipping on his metal leg, of course. Astrid stayed a step behind, silently fuming. The dragons ambled behind them, as the rest of the villagers spread to make a wide path for them.

Maybe she should go with plan number twoâ€¦ or was that plan number four? Life was so much simpler when you could just hit everything with an axe.

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Fishlegs was putting two small baskets of fish in front of the Zippleback outside the forge. He tried using one basket, but Barf and Belch kept fighting over it.

As he pulled off the lids, and watched the dragon eat he asked them; "You know you guys share the same stomach, right?"

Barf looked at him strangely, and Belch took the opportunity to reach over and snatch a fish. This started the two heads snapping at each other. Fishlegs waded in, pushing them apart. "Come on, guys!" He stood between them as they went back to eating, each of them keeping a distrustful eye on the other.

The twins walked up, looking a bit sweaty and disheveled. Ruffnut spoke up. "Hey, Fish, can we have our dragon back?"

Fishlegs turned around. "The Chief said you had to fix the shed first. You can't be done already."

Tuffnut patted Belch. "Well, it's getting dark soon, and we wanted a ride. We'll be done tomorrow, okay?"

Ruffnut pleaded. "C'mon. He gets jumpy if he can't fly. Just a quick trip around the island, _please_"

Fishlegs thought, folding under the eyes of the girl. "Okay, let me ask Gobber if he needs anymore Zippleback ga-"

There was a loud _WHOOOMP!_ And a cloud of smoke burst out the door and windows of the forge. Gobber staggered outside, sooty and coughing. "Aye, _that_ was a good one."

Fishlegs sighed. "_Fourth_ time today. You okay, Gobber?"

Tuffnut walked over. "You didn't tell me you'd be blowing stuff up! Can we help?"

Gobber looked over at him. "I didn' do it on _purpose_, ya whelp!" He turned to Fishlegs. "Tha's enough fer today, boy. We'll try agin tomorra'." Turning to the twins, he shook his hammer arm. "An' you have that dragon back here right after mornin' meal, ye hear?"

"Thanks, Gobber!" They both yelled, jumping onto the Zippleback and taking off.

Fishlegs walked up to the smith. "Maybe we should wait for Hiccup. I mean, we're not stupid, and you can do some fancy metal work, but we're justâ€ missing something."

Gobber smoothed his beard back down. "Aye, tha' would be best, lad. But we need to have somethin' for him to see." He put his hand on Fishleg's shoulder. "Let's go eat and get a mug. Somethin' ta wash down the taste of Zippleback gas."

As they walked up the hill to the Great Hall, Fishlegs asked; "Gobber? Why all this work? Iâ€™ I mean, Hiccup will be back in a

week."

Gobber slowed his pace. "Look here, lad. I know how so many people been callin' him useless for years."

Fishlegs winced. "Yeah."

Gobber looked around. "Y'ever think how with th' way things are goin', he's about the only one in the village who _ain't_ useless now?"

Fishlegs frowned and thought about it.

Gobber went on. "Way I see it, I spent years teachin' him the forge. Look at what he did with it. Now I figger I'd better be learnin' some meself. Bound to be changes comin'."

20. Bits of Respect

****Bits of Respect.****

_Helgafjell_â€| The Holy Mountain.

It was a warm spring day. Okay, _every_ day was a warm spring day. Helgafjell was part of, associated with, and yet completely separate from the lofty golden halls of Valhalla.

It was peaceful here. Everyone pursued their own pastime. They moved at their own speed, which was leisurely. The place held those who were good people, but for the most part, not warriors. The ones who inhabit this realm had been bakers, or smiths, or makers of garments, or those of study.

Their lives were simple. They worked at what they wanted to. They met, always in good cheer. They talked, they drank, they told storiesâ€| it was a life of simple needs and simple desires.

There were a _few_ exceptions, of course.

One such was sitting on a log at the edge of a large, shimmering lake. On a stump next to him was a tankard of sweet mead. On his other side was a small campfire.

He was watching.

He was watching the long pole angling towards the water, a long line curving from its end into the blue water. He watched for the slight movement that told him a fish had spotted the bit of meat on the end.

He was impressive, this watcher. Massive in build, tall, with arms of corded iron. Few could stare into his eyes for long, lest they catch a glimpse of the horrors hidden in their depths. Not one to be crossed lightly.

But he had not fought in many, many crossings of the sun. So many that he had only the most cloudy idea of just how many years had passed.

But it did not matter to him. He had washed his hands of the blood. His sword and shield hung, unused, on the wall of his small house just down the shore. He had made peace with his soul, and his Gods, and even a few of his enemies.

He had found peace, and even a bit of happiness. He had the quiet of the nights in his small home. He had the friends he met with for food and drink. He was always willing to help others with the tasks they had, mostly involving moving heavy objects.

And then there was Hildegard. The pretty, quiet woman who sought him out at night. People paired off as they pleased here. For a night, a year, or until Ragnarok. There were no questions asked here.

She understood him. She kept the nightmares away. Echoes of clashing steel, the roar of monsters, the last breath of a man not yet fully aware he was already dead. For some, there is no ending of the dreams.

He felt someone.

He turned to look. A man was walking down the path from the village, one of the many that dotted Helgafjell. He smiled slightly, for it had been many years since they had talked last.

The visitor was armed, strange in itself here. His weapon bounced off his leg with every other step. He stopped at the end of the log.

The watcher waved his hand. "Be seated, friend. You've come a long way. Finish the drink here, I can get more."

The visitor sat. He reached out, grabbed the tankard and swallowed it in a few gulps. "_Ahhh_. It's always good here." He turned and put out his arm.

The watcher grabbed it in a firm clasp. The grip of those two would have broken the arm of many a lesser man. They both smiled.

"It's been a long time, Thor. Nice of you to come by."

"You've always been my friend,
Beowulf."

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As the group got to the Great Hall, Camicazi bounded up the stairs to pull the door open. With a smile on her face and a curtsy, she waved inside. "After _you_, oh great dragon master."

Hiccup sighed. "You're not gonna let this go, are you? You are enjoying this _wwaaaay_ too much." He went up the stairs with a bit less agility.

Bertha paused at the bottom of the stairs. She was about to ask where to put the dragons, when Toothless just walked right by her, following Hiccup.

She watched Astrid turn to the Nadder. "Stormfly, go get yourself some fish."

Bertha saw Astrid hold her fingers up in a 'V' shape. She pointed to her own eyes, then pointed to the roof of the Great Hall. _Damn!_ That Nadder _nodded_ back to her. Then the Nadder rumbled something. Looking around, Bertha saw that the Night Fury was looking back over its shoulder. The black demon rumbled something back, and the Nadder walked towards the large village urn for feeding the passing dragons.

Bertha was trying to grasp all this as she looked to Astrid. "Just how smart _are_ they, girl?"

The blond Berkan thought for a second. "Astrid, Chief. Astrid Hofferson. And they're _very_ smart. Smarter than a lot of Vikings I know." Astrid glanced up to see Toothless entering the Hall after the others. "And _he's_ the smartest of all. I _swear_ he understands everything Hiccup says." She turned to go up the stairs, then paused, looking back at Bertha. "And he's very, _very_ protective of Hiccup."

Bertha wondered if that last bit was simply a statement, a warning, or a threat as she followed Astrid inside.

Off to one side Indis grabbed a bunch of the ones standing around, giving them instructions. She said for the best to be laid out for everyone. She warned them about bothering the dragons. Then she took a deep breath and followed her Chief.

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Kara was sitting on a log, staring at the cold fire pit when Thrud landed. Her horse stumbled a bit.

Kara watched Thrud slide off her horse's back, and fall to her knees, leaning over and retching.

She walked over. "So they were right."

Thrud wiped her mouth on her sleeve and nodded. "They're there, all right. I got as close as I could, butâ€¦" She sat back on her heels, shrugging.

Kara nodded. "Well, our job is to locate and report. That's all we can do for now."

Thrud looked up at her. "Why?"

Kara cocked her head.

"Why do this at all? Even if we could get near them, they can'tâ€¦ _see_ us."

Kara nodded. "I just follow orders. Freya makes the plans."

But she thought. Thrud had brought up the basic rule of the Valkyries. Only a dead or dying Viking could see them. If a living mortal looked to the sky in their passing, all they would notice is a black swan. To see a Valkyrie meant you were on your way to Valhalla.

This made missions other than the gathering of souls rather awkward. They were great for information gathering. They could go anywhere, and quickly. But interacting with mortals was beyond their ability.

Kara walked to her horse. "We need to get back. And you need to change that outfit." She paused and sniffed. "And wash down your horse."

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Camicazi waved Hiccup to the big table at the head of the hall. He sat on a bench near the end, because Toothless was next to him, sniffing and looking around at the wide-eyed Bog-Burglars filling the hall. Hiccup put a hand on the dragon's side, patting him and calming him down. Or maybe calming himself down. He still wasn't used to being the center of attention for large groups.

Astrid slid quickly in to Hiccup's other side, causing Camicazi to narrow her eyes as she walked around to sit across from the two. Bertha completed the group as she sat at the head of the table.

Indis was sitting next to her, warily watching the black dragon sitting next to Hiccup. She didn't feel exactly worried, but her job as Bertha's Sword Arm was to ensure the safety of the tribe, particularly the Chief and her heir. For some reason, Camicazi completely trusted the Berkans, but since it had been three years since they had seen them, she felt concern.

Pitchers of light ale, water, and yak milk were placed on the table near the visitors. Empty mugs were liberally scattered around. A couple of full ones were quickly placed in front of their guests.

"So." Camicazi smiled, "Let's hear it."

Hiccup glanced at Astrid, and then turned towards their hosts. "Well, it all started when I shot down a Night Fury."

There was a loud collective gasp from the crowd of warriors around them.

Hiccup looked around. "Awww, come ON!" he said. He pointed to Toothless. "He's right HERE!"

Camicazi laughed. "It's not that, Hiccup!" She smiled at his puzzled face. "Nobody, no matter how drunk or crazy, ever, ever has been able to say something like that and back it up." She waved to the eager crowd around them. "They're here to listen to the biggest story in the history ofâ€¦ well, everything."

She leaned forward and rested her chin on her hands, propped up on the table. "Do go on."

Hiccup was noticeably nervous. At the beginning, he kept stuttering, while using a few wrong words, which caused a few giggles, which made him more embarrassed, until he was about to close up entirely.

Astrid placed a hand on his arm. "Hiccup, they're not laughing at you. They respect you. Isn't that what you always wanted?" She rubbed his shoulder. "Act like the last few nights, when it was just us talking around the fire. That was fine, wasn't it? Just us, and Toothless and Stormfly. He's right here with you. You can do this."

He looked at Astrid's concerned face and nodded. Taking a quick swig of ale, he reached out and scratched Toothless's neck. He took a deep breath, and imagined the huge fire of their island.

And so, for the next hour, a blushing Hiccup told his tale. There were gasps, and 'awwwws' and mutterings, and clapping at various times, particularly at the place where he cut the dragon loose instead of killing him, and when the dragon let him live in return. He talked about making his tail, and their first flights. He didn't notice the wistful eyes of dozens of women as he described the world from high above, with a landscape of puffy clouds and stars brighter than any Viking had ever seen.

Astrid did, though, and slid a bit closer to him.

Camicazi frowned as he talked about his leaving, and Astrid finding his secret place. There were laughs all around, except for Astrid, when he told them his rather unconventional method of convincing her to listen. Hands edged near weapons as he told of the heat inside the nest, and the shock of the great queen making herself known.

You could have heard a feather drop as he told how his Father had startled the Nightmare during his final exam, Toothless coming to the rescue, his capture, and Hiccup accidentally telling him how to find the nest.

Hiccup hung his head and spoke quietly then. "I didn't mean to tell him. We'd seen it. Nobody could fight that thing."

He closed his eyes. "Then Dad disowned me, took Toothless, and everyone who could lift a weapon sailed off to the nest."

Astrid reached out and laid a hand on top of his, shaking slightly as it lay on the table. He turned his head and looked at her.

Bertha looked confused. "Disowned? But the letter I got was nothing but praise. So much so, I thought it had to be!" She trailed off at the sorrowful look from the boy.

"MOM!" Camicazi interrupted.

Hiccup just nodded. "I understand, believe me."

Astrid said in a tight voice. "There's more." She squeezed his hand.

He told them of the other teens showing up, a quick training class for them on the arena dragons, and hurrying to arrive just in time to see the entire fleet burning. He spoke of the heroics of the others as he tried to free his friend, and how Stoick saved them both.

"And then he said he was proud of me." He sighed. "When we took off, I think I finally understood what he meant when he said we take care

of our own." He reached for a mug. "Even dying didn't seem so bad."

People were leaning towards him so far they stumbled over each other as he told of the fight. How the Night Fury hid in the clouds, trying to hurt the great beast. How they finally shot holes in the wings, and the dive to the ground, and finally using the queen's own fire against her.

Hiccup wound down. "Thenâ€¦ there was just fireâ€¦ and the tailâ€¦ andâ€¦" Astrid winced as he unknowingly gripped her hand very hard.

She reached up with her other hand and laid it on his arm. "I've got this." Hiccup slumped at his seat.

She turned to the Chief and told about Stoick finding the dragon, saddle empty and tail broken, with no sign of his son. She smiled as she described the joy everyone felt when Toothless opened his wings and presented Hiccup still alive. She quickly talked about the trip home, and the days of waiting to see if he would ever wake up. Hiccup just sat there, holding Astrid's hand. She finally finished, looking around. There wasn't a dry eye in the hall. One ten-year-old girl, sniffing loudly, even looked under the table to get a glimpse of Hiccup's leg.

In the quiet, Bertha cleared her throat. "_Well_. Johann wasn't as mad as he sounded, then. That's a tale for the bards, young Haddock. If there hadn't been so much to see since, I still wouldn't have believed it."

Indis stood, and waved forward the women with loaded trays standing nearby. "And this looks like a good time for some meat and drink." Trays heaped with roast, and pitchers of ale began being set on tables throughout the hall.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Snotlout and Fishlegs were talking quietly on one side of the Great Hall. The plates were empty, but the pitcher of ale at hand wasn't yet.

They looked up as Ruffnut drug her brother over and sat him at the table. He promptly popped his head on the table. She flopped down beside him. Looking around, she reached over and grabbed Snotlout's cup, draining it.

Snotlout looked over at Tuffnut, bent over and grimacing. "What happened to him?"

Tuffnut moaned and sat up. "I think I ruptured my uterus."

Fishlegs raised an eyebrow. "Uh, I don't think tha-"

Snotlout nodded. "Yeah, last time that happened to me, I couldn't work out for a week." He grabbed the cup from in front of Fishlegs, filled it, and shoved it over to Tuffnut.

Fishlegs shook his head. "You couldn't have, Tuff, only gi-"

"Oh, you're a healer now, Fish?" Tuffnut growled.

Fishlegs rolled his eyes. "What I'm trying to say, Tuff, is that there's only one uterus at this table, and you don't have it!"

Tuffnut looked around the table, his eyes lowering as he looked at his sister.

Ruffnut shoved him. "Well don't look at me! I didn't take it. You probably lost it when you fell off of Belch."

Tuffnut snarled. "I wouldn't put it past you. You're always stealing my stuff."

Fishlegs sighed. "I don't think it's that easy to lose, Tuff." He had learned to give up explaining things to the Thorston twins.

Ruffnut looked at Fishlegs. "It's not that important, is it? I mean, if we can't find it."

Fishlegs was proud of his straight face. "He'll never miss it, Ruff. Won't even notice."

Snotlout piped up; "Maybe we can look for it! The arena isn't that big."

Tuffnut reached for the pitcher. "I need a few more to kill the pain."

Fishlegs smiled. "Well, it is a clear night, and there's a gibbous moon."

Tuffnut frowned. "What do monkeys have to do with it?"

Fishlegs shook his head. "Not gibbons, Tuff. Gibbous. It's when the moon is waxing, and between half full and full."

"So the monkeys have to wax the moon?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Snotlout sneered. "Monkeys can't get that high."

"Well your dragon can't either. So who waxes it?"

"I don't know. Maybe Hiccup has to. A Night Fury can fly higher than ours can."

"Guys!" Fishlegs sighed. "Nobody has to wax the moon. It means growing."

"Why didn't you say so? You confuse me a lot, you know."

After another hour, and another pitcher, Snotlout hauled Tuffnut to his feet and helped him home. They left talking about going by the dragon training area to look for Tuffnut's missing uterus. Ruffnut sat sipping her ale, tapping a finger on the table, and looking at Fishlegs. He was frowning and looking at her.

"You look like you want to say something, Fish."

He fidgeted some. "Wellllll_â€¦ I looked it up, and you were wrong."

She raised a brow. "Wrong about what?"

Fishlegs cleared his throat. "That day you and Astrid were arguing. I looked it up. None of theâ€¦ _organs_â€¦ under discussion lead directly to the heart."

Ruffnut laughed. "That's just a _saying_, Fish. Don't take everything so literally. You know, things like '_a stich in time shouldn't throw stones_', and that sort. You don't take those kinds of things seriously!" On the other hand, this was _Fishlegs_.

"Oh."

"And how did you figure it out?"

"Gothi has books. Some she uses for training the Healers. A couple even translated from Greek Doctors."

"And they show where everything is and what it does?"

Fishlegs nodded.

Ruffnut leaned forward. "With _pictures_?"

Another wary nod.

Ruffnut smiled. "_Fish!_ I can't _believe_ it! Dirty books?"

He shook his head wildly. "NO! Nope. _Nononono_. Not _those_ kind of books."

Ruffnut looked slightly disappointed.

She leaned over the table. "Now that those two idiots have gone, tell me who _really_ had it."

Fishlegs looked out the partially open door. "Oh! _Look_ at the _time_! I have toâ€¦ clip Meatlug's claws." He muttered a 'Bye' running out the door.

Ruffnut smiled. Then she thought. The World was changing. Hiccup did all this weird stuff by being really smart. Fishlegs was smart, but in a different way. Was _smart_ the way the future worked?

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Hiccup looked at the large plates of food spread all over the tables.

Bertha pointed a small knife she was cutting meat with. "Go ahead, you two, dig in."

Hiccup stood up. He stared directly at the Chief. "Um, there's something I've _got_ to tell you. It's pretty important, and part of why I'm here."

Everyone froze. Bertha and Camicazi focused completely on Hiccup, ignoring the whispering in the background.

Astrid rubbed her forehead. "_Before_ we eat?"

He was wringing his hands together. "Well, I, ah, sort of got myselfâ€¦ ahâ€¦ _banished_."

There was total silence for a few seconds, and then Bertha leaned forward. "_Banished_?"

He nodded.

"Stoick, your _Father_, banished his own _son_ from Berk? For what _reason_?"

Hiccup raised a hand. "It wasn't _his_ fault, Chief Bertha. Some people were not as forgiving of the dragons as the others. They made charges against me. The Council had to listen."

Bertha folded her arms. "Real charges?"

Hiccup shrugged. "Legal ones at the time. They accused me of cavorting with dragons. While we were still at war. Da- the Chief had to answer them."

Astrid nudged him. "That's '_consorting_'."

Hiccup nodded. "That too. Not that I didn't do any cavorting. Toothless is great for that."

Hiccup looked at Camicazi and continued. "And it's not forever. Just a few weeks. Just to shut them up."

Bertha leaned forward, folding her hands together. "So you came here."

Hiccup nodded. "Because Dad told me you knew. And you have every right to throw me out. I'll understand. But I had to tell you. I couldn't take your hospitality under false pretenses." He sat down and looked at the Chief, awaiting her decision.

Astrid sighed. "Hiccup, I would have been _perfectly_ happy _not_ telling them that part. At least not until tomorrow."

Every eye and ear in the hall was on the Chief. Her daughter was staring at her with pleading eyes.

Bertha cleared her throat. "_Ahem_." Hiccup Haddock, as far as I'm concerned, nothing has changed. The details of what happened with your tribe don't bother me because I have seen the result of your actions. You have stopped the dragon attacks, you have our gratitude, and you are welcomeâ€¦ _very_ welcome to stay here as long as you want to."

She stood up. "I want you to know that we have been smoking and preserving food non-stop for _months_. Without the raids, we have enough food that we have to eat it or it will _rot_ on us. We've never had that problem, _ever_, before now."

She waved an arm in a circle around her. "I declare this feast in honor of Hiccup Haddock of Berk! Bring more! Bring the best! Fish for the Night Fury! And your dragon, too, girl."

Cheers and applause erupted around the hall as Bertha sat back down. "Now, dig in. _Eat_. Can't have all this going to waste, can we? And you _sure_ look like you could use a good meal."

And she thought of how this could be to her advantage.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

With the setting sun, Beowulf took his guest into his small home by the water, leaving the fishing pole against the wall.

"Sit, I'll freshen those mugs." He walked over to a medium sized cask and moved the lid over, dunking in the tankards.

"Convenient." Nodded Thor with approval.

Beowulf shrugged. "Saves time doing all that walking." as he plunked one down, sitting across the table. "So, what brings you by, not that I mind. I guess you didn't drop by to ask about the fishing. And I hear there is good mead in Aasgard."

Thor looked at him. "You know we have our own problems back home."

His host nodded. "Are they that bad? I thought you had it under control."

Thor placed his mug on the table. "It's at a rather delicate point." He looked thoughtful. "Friend, what makes a Hero?"

Beowulf made a face. _Was this a joke?_ Then he looked at the God's face. "Why ask _me?_ _You_ are the ultimate judge."

Thor smiled and leaned forward. "What would you say? Strength? Skill at arms?"

Beowulf shrugged. "Those certainly help, that's for sure."

Thor leaned back. "And we have found a Heroâ€¦ a great one, who has none of those things. And who by wit alone, has slain a foe so great as to make Grendel no more than a common cat."

Beowulf smiled. "Now _that_ is a tale I wish to hear."

So Thor told the great Viking Hero of the tale of the young boy who defied his people, befriended the enemy, took to the skies as a bird, and fought face to face with one of Loki's deadliest creations.

The cask was much lower when the story was done, and Beowulf shook his head. "Remarkable. And he lives still."

Thor nodded. "For now. That is where it gets complicated."

Beowulf laughed. "Oh! And it was all so _simple_ up to this point!"

Then he thought. "He lived. That means your sister is unhappy. Or cousinâ€¦| your family has always been so complicated itself."

Thor nodded. "She has been trying to manipulate the Prophecy. The boy spoils her plans. We are keeping an eye on him."

His host sighed. "Lord, my shield is dusty and my hand no longer has the roughness of swinging a sword, but I have sworn to serve you as I can, in life and beyond it. You have come here. What do you want of me?"

Thor shook his head. "Well, first of-

He stopped as the door opened. A young looking woman walked in, basket of assorted produce hanging on one arm. She saw the God of Thunder sitting at her man's table. She dropped the basket, and fell to one knee, her forehead resting on the other.

Thor snorted. "Get up, girl! My brother goes in for all that nonsense, but you have proven yourself merely by being here. Get _up_, I say!"

The woman stood slowly, looking back and forth between the two men. She was reassured somewhat by the calm look on Beowulf's face. He bent down to help her gather the scattered foodstuffs.

"It's all right, don't worry. I'll get _this_ and you grab yourself a drink."

In another minute everyone had a mug. The men were seated, and the woman stood behind Beowulf, one hand on his shoulder.

Thor smiled. "_So_. You _are_ enjoying life here. So pretty. And she doesn't talk much."

Beowulf smiled as he reached up and laid his hand over hers. "You know that the mortals the Gods talk through lose their voice to speak to lesser beings."

Thor nodded. "So you were an Elderâ€¦| wise woman, witchâ€¦| wherever you were then." The woman nodded.

Beowulf smiled broadly. "By the way, do you remember the old seer who sent me on the journey to kill Grendel?"

Thor shuddered. "How could one forget that hideous old hag? Still gives me nightmares."

Beowulf laughed. "Thor, God of Thunderâ€¦| meet Hildegardeâ€¦| _hideous old hag_!"

Thor sputtered, dribbling mead down his shirt. He looked at the quiet girl. "Ah. _Forgive_ me, my Lady. It seems death has been quite good to you." He tilted his head. "So, how did youâ€¦| twoâ€¦| um-"

Beowulf lifted the hand on his shoulder to his mouth and kissed it. "She always regretted sending me away. She thought I went to my doom. So when she finally died, she came to find me. And _stayed_."

Thor smiled. "Old loves returned. Sounds like my brother."

"Sounds like another good story. Let me make us some food and you can tell it over a meal."

Hildegarde pushed down on his shoulders as he was going to stand. In no time at all, she had cut some cured meat, refilled everyone's mug, placed bread and butter on the table, carved bits of fresh cheese, and taken a seat on the end of the table.

Thor appraised the food. "Very nice. But she seems too quiet, my friend. I'm sure a few days with Sif could cure her of that."

Beowulf smiled. "She has her ways of telling me what she wants."

Thor laughed. Then he suddenly thought of something. "Damn! Wait a minute! Other Oracles, wise womenâ€¦ when they die, their voices are given back to them!"

Thor looked back and forth between the two confused faces. "Father wouldn't have forgotten this." He looked straight into Hildegarde's bright, wide eyes. "This means the Gods have not finished talking to you yet, my dear."

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The happy couple left Gothi's hut. It had been a good indication from the runes this time. A boy, born in the late spring. She got up to get one of her books.

Berta placed the runes in their woolen bag, setting that in the bowl, and placing it on a shelf. She watched the old woman, actually humming as she scanned the leather-bound volumes on the dusty bench.

"You've been different lately, Gothi." A slight halt in the humming was the only indicator she had been heard. "And you don't need to sleep so much after praying to the Gods." Another momentary pause.

Berta tapped the edge of the silver goblet next to the bowl. There was a 'ding'. "Was it this? Was this all for Hiccup?" She lowered herself to her knees, level with the tiny old woman. "Where did this come from, Gothi?"

Gothi merely turned to face her, lightly leaning on her staff. She merely smiled and looked upwards.

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****Notes: ****

Sorry, I usually don't interrupt a story with this, but it's been so long, you deserve an explanation.

Some people complain of writer's block. I assure you, this was not the case. Call it writer's flood. I have come up with so much lately I had to organize a few things.

In the case of this story, I broke the law. Not the kind of law where the Police break down the door with machine guns, but the laws of this World.

See, when you build your World in a story, you have to lay out any special rules. I did so, in the first few chapters.

But you see, I had the ending of the story figured out long ago. You should always know where you want the story to go when you start it. There are few things more frustrating than a good idea, and someone just gives up, saying; 'I don't know what to do.'

I always knew where this was going. I just am really, really wordy in my setup, so I hope it's entertaining enough.

But going over the last few chapters, I found they violated the laws of my World, so that meant editing a hundred pages. So if a thread seems to go nowhere, I apologize. I've tried to fix everything, while leaving the heart intact.

Plus, I've just had to get some stuff down for the sequel.

Oops, did I just say sequel? I'll edit that out. It's not exactly a sequel. But I won't mention it. Or the fact that at least one plot can be decided by the readers. I won't say anything about that either.

So, I had to polish up the grand ending of my other story, fix this one, and get the new one out of my brain. I feel a bit caught up now.

Thank you all.

21. Past Tense

****Threats and Promises.****

The eating, drinking, and general festivities went on for some hours. A group started playing in one corner, and Bog-Burglars began dancing.

The two from Berk were staring. Due to the fact that there were so few men here, there were quite a few women dancing together. Hiccup and Astrid both turned a bit pink.

Astrid nudged Hiccup with a smile. "We could join them."

Hiccup stared at her. "I'm just getting halfway decent at walking with this. And I never got much of a chance to dance, remember. And it's a bit sore."

Astrid sighed, and leaned on his shoulder. Another thing to remind her about the way he had been shut out. "Maybe we should call it a night, then."

Hiccup nodded. "Really. I'm about to nod off even in this noise. " He leaned over and rapped his knuckles on the table to get Camicazi's attention. "Hey there." He had to speak a bit loudly; "Can we go

sleep somewhere?"

Camicazi nodded, held up a finger, and went over to talk to her Mother. She came back and beckoned them out. She waved to the few people who noticed, raising their mugs to their guests. Toothless, stuffed with fish to where his belly almost dragged the floor, ambled lazily after them.

As Camicazi closed the doors behind them, muffling the noise, Hiccup let out a huge breath and leaned against Toothless, who gave a quiet concerned warble.

Astrid watched him. "Tired?"

Hiccup gave a tired grin. "Yeah. I'm not used to being the center of attention yet. Kind of overwhelming." He looked around the quiet village slightly below. "I never thought about it, really. I always dreamed about being, well, just another Viking, like everyone else." He rubbed the top of Toothless's head. "I didn't think I'd have so much trouble with it."

Astrid walked over and took his other hand. "We can go back to our island if it's a real problem."

Hiccup shook his head. "Not a problem, justâ€¦ I'll get used to it. I have to now."

Camicazi took this chance to jump in. "Well, nobody's going anywhere but our hall. We've got rooms, and beds for you. Iâ€¦ we can't let you go home badmouthing our hospitality, Haddock."

Hiccup smiled at her as they went down the stairs. "Wouldn't do that anyway. I'm so full I can hardly move."

Camicazi sniffed. "Well, you need to eat more. Look at you! Doesn't Berk feed you at all?"

Astrid bristled at that. "We didn't starve him!"

Hiccup shook Astrid's hand. "Hey. Easy there." To Camicazi; "I didn't have much of an appetite for a while. Lately, though, I've been eating like a Gronckle."

Camicazi snickered. "Well, the hall's just ahead. Sleep as late as you want. I'll keep everyone quiet."

She opened the door of the Chief's hall, ushering them in. Toothless wandered carefully over to the hearth, turned around in a circle, and laid down, his half-open eyes still fixed on Hiccup.

There were three doors on one side. Camicazi opened the first one. "Astrid, here's your room."

The blond Berkan stood in the doorway. It was a plain simple room, with a fair-sized bed heaped with furs, and a glowing brazier to the side.

Camicazi walked over and opened the second door. "Hiccup, here's yours. Indis had them warmed up for you."

As Hiccup walked into the room, he stopped. "Thanks. Thank your Mother for me if I don't see her first."

Camicazi stopped at the door. "Anything you need, I'm right here." She pointed towards the third room.

"Thanks."

"Anything at all."

"Thanks again."

"I _mean_ it. Just bang on the wall. I'll probably be up for a while."

"I'll remember that."

"Well, goodnight then." She slowly walked down the room and entered the third door.

Astrid leaned on Hiccup's door. "Well, _that_ was a hint, _loverboy_."

"Hint?"

Astrid put one hand on her hip, and let the other one sway as she sashayed across the room with exaggerated hip movements. She did her best imitation of the Bog-Burglar Heiress; "If there's just _annnything_ you want." She leaned over and batted her eyes several times at Hiccup, dropping her voice to a throaty whisper; "_Annnnnnnnything_."

Hiccup held his hand over his mouth to smother the laughter. After a bit, he shook his head. "She's not like _that_, Astrid. She's _always_ been the friendly sort."

Astrid smiled back, showing a bit more teeth. "Well just don't let her get _too_ friendly." She walked over, hugged him, and kissed him lightly.

As she left, she looked back at him. "If you get the overpowering urge to bang on a wall, it had better be _this_ one." She closed the door behind her.

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Kara gave her report to Freya, concern in her voice. She also brought up Thrud's issue. The girl was right. They couldn't actively interact with ordinary, living Vikings.

Freya waved it off. "I've been thinking about that. I have to go away for a bit. You can keep an eye on things."

Kara frowned. "How long? And _where_ are you going?"

Freya shrugged. "I don't know how long. The _where_ is farther south."

Kara raised an eyebrow. "How _far_ south?"

Freya smiled. "Far enough, I'm afraid. I'm going far enough that we aren't the Gods they worship." She began buckling on her armor. "I have tales of a magic user. A powerful witch who is stronger than she pretends. Her magic can play with space and time, and is particularly useful in dealing with the people we need to." She looked towards Kara; "She can help us with a few things. I'm going to need you later."

Kara frowned. "If they don't worship us, you can be in danger. We _can_ be hurt."

Freya shook her head. "It won't be like that. Not like the wars." She smiled; "I don't intend taking over _yet_."

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The night passed everywhere in peace and quiet. At least outwardly.

Astrid stared at the ceiling. '_What did I do? Did I just invite him to myâ€| room? What if he takes me up on it? What if he takes her up on it?_' She eventually dropped into a restless sleep, filled with flapping wings, wind, and boys with reddish hair.

Camicazi was staring into the glowing coals of the brazier in her room. She had played the hostess, remaining calm on the outside while she controlled her emotions bouncing around. Seeing a _Night Fury_. Seeing him after three yearsâ€| slightly taller, but still the same. All that intensity and intelligence crammed inside the same slim body. It was no surprise, really, if she thought of it, that it would have been him to end the dragon wars.

She wondered what her Mother was thinking right now. She would have to keep an eye on her. _And_ him. _And_ the blonde that seemed to latch onto him as close as his new metal foot.

And in the center room, a young man tossed and turned, with dreams of fire and falling.

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The work day starts early in a Viking village. People are lighting fires and getting dressed before the sun, preparing to get out as soon as the first rays make it light enough not to fall in a hole.

Bog-Burglars didn't wake up like normal folk. There was none of this drowsy stretching and yawning nonsense. They woke up instantly, eyes taking in their surroundings, and then pouncing out of bed. Camicazi was awake and armed within seconds.

She stepped out of her room. The fire was going well, kept up by sentries Indis had posted, to care for, and more likely, keep track of their guests.

A glance told her the black dragon was no longer in front of the hearth. A few steps further, however, showed that the door to Hiccup's room was open, with the half-tail of the Night Fury lying just inside. A glance around the door showed the dragon stretched

beside the bed. Hiccup was half lying across Toothless, his head on the dragon's shoulders and arm flung across his back. They both seemed to be sleeping deeply, but a twitch of the tail as she looked in told her that the dragon was aware of her presence.

Turning and continuing to the main door, she noticed that Astrid was no longer inside. Stepping out to the front platform, she saw the blonde Berkan stretching while talking to the woman guarding the hall. The guard straightened up from her relaxed stance when she saw the Bog heir.

Camicazi nodded; "Thanks, Blue. You and Grabber take today off. _No_ duties, hear? Same tonight?"

Blue, a tall, wiry woman, shrugged. "Sure thing, Cami. Not bad duty at all." She picked her spear up from where it leaned against the wall and went off in search of food. She paused after a few steps, and turned back. "By the way, the Hooligan lad had a bad night. And that dragon can open doors. Just thought you'd like to know." She walked off.

Astrid stood up and looked at her. "I want to thank you for letting us stay."

Camicazi waved it off. "Welcome. Besides, you're allies. And really, we were _dying_ to hear about the dragons. Johann didn't do the story justice. Even the way _he_ tells stories."

Astrid fidgeted a bit. "And while we're on the subjectâ€¦" She paused.

Camicazi smiled. "_Which_ subject? Dragons, our hospitality, or Johann's stories?"

Astrid smiled; "One of the laws here is that no member of our tribe can help the banished. And I have to be back tomorrow." She looked down a moment. "I've been wondering if it's okay for him to stay here alone the rest of his time."

"Of _course_ it's okay! And he won't be _alone_. We'll keep an eye on him. _Several_, in fact."

"_That's_ what I'm afraid of."

"_Excuse_ _me?_"

"You know what I mean."

Camicazi folded her arms tightly across her chest, and gave the blonde her most dangerous glare. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to spell it out for me. I'm a bit slow this early in the day."

Astrid matched her glare for glare. She waved an arm around. "There's, like, a dozen _men_ in this whole place. And a few boys. The rest are allâ€¦" she fought to think of an appropriate term.

"_Aha_!" Camicazi barked. "I thought _you_, of all those idiots on Berk, would understand _us_."

"What's _that_ supposed to mean?"

Camicazi sighed. "You don't understand this place at _all_, do you? _You_, a strong, skilled shield maiden, still stuck in your traditions."

"Riding dragons isn't exactly a Viking _tradition_, in case you haven't noticed."

"But for all that we're allies, and back each other up, _some_ people just can't get over the fact that we're a tribe run by _women_!"

"I didn't say that!"

"You came pretty damn _close_! You think we're just a bunch of whores here!"

"I didn't- â€|weren'tâ€| wasn'tâ€|" Astrid's shoulders sank.

Camicazi shook her head. "And to think I was considering inviting you to join us."

She turned and looked out over the village, calming her breathingâ€| and her temper. "Did anybody ever bother to tell you how the Bog-Burglars came to be? Or do they _still_ keep that under a blanket?"

Astrid shrugged. "I don't know. I don't _know_ about a lot of things lately, it seems." She folded her arms across her chest. "It still doesn't feel _real_ sometimes. Hiccup changed _everything_ in just a few weeks." She sighed; "And everything I feelâ€| about dragons, and about, well, men. _Him_, specifically." Her eyes became slits. "And I'm _keeping_ him."

Camicazi smirked. "Fighting for the man you love. Very admirable. I can respect that." She tilted her head. "Or is it love, _hmmmm_?"

Astrid bristled. "I'll have you know that Stoick and my Father have an _agreement_. Hiccup is _mine_, girl!"

Camicazi snapped her fingers. "_I_ knew it! Stoick never let any moss grow under his feet. I knew he'd have Hiccup tied fast to a Berk girl." She frowned. "_Mother_ won't like that, you know."

"And what does your Mother have to do with this?"

Camicazi sighed. "I thought you were smart. But maybe you aren't aware of all the deals tribes make with each other." She reached down and smoothed down her tunic. "Relations between tribes have _always_ been helped along by marriage. People don't want to fight their own families." She looked out over the hill. "And when tribes have heirs of compatible age and _body parts_, well, you know."

"Soâ€| your Mother thinks thatâ€| _Hiccup_â€| would-"

"Make a fine match for her daughter."

"Which _happens_ to be _you_."

"And she won't be happy hearing what Stoick did."

"And _you_?"

Camicazi sighed. "To tell the real truth? I don't care." She smiled at Astrid's raised brow. "I don't _want_ to marry, even if the Chief's family often does, even if temporary. But Mom's worried about all this new dragon stuff. And she wants to be part of it."

"But we're allies. _Hiccup_ would _never_ attack you."

"I know that."

"Why?"

"What?"

"_Why_? Hiccup said you guys wrote each other. And last time you were on Berk, you were being _really_ nice to him. _Why_?"

Camicazi's mouth slowly smiled. "You didn't see him, did you?"

"I saw him every day."

"No, you didn't _see_ him. There's a difference. You talk so high and mighty _now_ about him, but _then_, you wouldn't look him in the eye."

Astrid's shoulders sank. "Yeah. We didn'tâ€¦"

"If you had _looked_ at him, or _listened_ to him, for just _one minute_!" Camicazi sat down on the top step of the porch. "You _might_ have realized that somewhereâ€¦ somehow, he was going to do _something_. Something big."

"That's not news. Stoick and most of the tribe are kicking ourselves over that. I know it _now_." Astrid sat down beside her. "I want to know what it was _then_."

Camicazi smiled. "Did he ever show you his books? His drawings, his inventionsâ€¦ his _ideas_?"

Astrid frowned. "No. He was always writing _something_. Weâ€¦ _I_ just never paid attention."

"Thought so. Well, you _should_. Some of it's a real eye-opener."

"There's nothing about him that would surprise me any more. And you don't know the _half_ of it."

Camicazi got serious again. "Look, you have to understand our history. We have a _tradition_ of not having _traditions_. And there's a reason behind it."

"What's this have to do with Hiccup?"

"Well, give me a chance to get around to that. _It all started_â€¦"

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It was the early days of the settlement of the Barbaric Archipelago, as it was later named. The Christian God was taking over the mainland south of them. The Viking age of expansion, and even their culture, was beginning to die out. Viking settlements, surrounded by European cities that were becoming more organized and efficient, were slowly destroying the old ways. These settlements were being absorbed, driven out, or even finally destroyed by larger forces of better organized and equipped Continentals.

A fleet of ships, that last great gathering of the Viking peoples, had had enough, and sailed off to found their own lands. They sailed northwards, eventually finding an unpopulated, scattered area of large islands where they could live. The ships scattered, in twos and threes, each to make their own homes, untouched by the turmoil in the south.

Some of these ships landed on an island they later named Berk, and a young man named Bork began his studies of the fantastic creatures to be found there. This was before the raids, and we well know the later history of that.

Other parts of this fleet settled elsewhere, and for a time, everyone was too busy building a life to have much to do with each other.

Several generations later, we take you to the island of the Uglithugs. Argh, the current Chief, had a problemâ€¦

Now, nobody could determine the reason for this problem. Perhaps it was the diet. Perhaps it was something in the water, or the food, or the soil. Perhaps it was something in the grass the livestock ate.

You see, almost all the babies born on this island were girls. So much so, that there were clans in danger of having no male to carry on the clan name. And this was particularly bad in the eyes of the Chief. The Elder tried to explain this as a good thing, since many women meant many babies, to help the tribe grow.

But Argh had his own problems with this. He had married a healthy, stout village girl, the daughter of his General. A year later, she presented him with a fine, healthy baby girl.

He was angered. So they tried again. A year after that, another baby, also a girl.

Now Argh was not a nice man. He could be fair, but he would not win any popularity contest. He also wasn't getting any younger. And he was going to have a son to take after him.

So he made up his own laws. He divorced his Wife, whose name was forgotten from history. Some said he banished them, woman and children. Some say he killed them.

We now introduce Helga the Horrible. No, she was not named that for her looks, as she was quite beautiful. She was a terror with a sword. She fought the first line in any battle, and had many victories,

bringing much honor to her clan.

So it really should have been no surprise when Argh came calling, with a marriage contract and a large sack of loot. The two were wed, and settled into the Chief's house. He did not mistreat her, although you could not claim there was any love there.

So, some months later, when Helga began feeling those things which made her worry, she went to the Elder. The Elder examined her, cast the runes, prayed to Frigg, and then looked at her and shook her head.

The signs said this would be a girl, and that Argh would not be pleased, to say the very least.

They kept this a secret, and Helga went back to her duties. Argh was joyous about her pregnancy. Surely, such a fine strong woman would bear him the heir he needed!

As a few more months passed, Helga made her plans. She was not the only pregnant woman with worries. And even some girls about to be married were in turmoil, since there was increasing hostility to women who bore daughters.

So Helga watched, and listened, and slowly gathered others. And one night, on a full moon, they struck.

The women snuck through the village in the middle of the night. From everywhere, they took those things they needed. They prepared the largest longship, and filled it with tools, metal, food, weapons, pots, baskets, a few sheep, chickens, and yaks, seeds—everything they would need to survive. Helga supervised the loading, and soon they were ready to sail. She and a few others cut the sails on the other ships, and threw their oars into the current. They wouldn't be followed too soon.

They sailed far east and north of the Uglithugs. After weeks of skimpy rations, supplemented by fishing, they found an island plenty large enough for them. Parts of it were low-lying, and covered in bogs. Helga proclaimed it Bog Island, and they began building.

They worked hard, finishing houses before the first snow. It wasn't easy, that first winter, and the good fishing was their salvation. The livestock had to be kept for breeding.

And then, on a night near Snoggletog, Helga gave birth. And it was a boy. The Elder, who had grown disgusted of the tribe's ways, had come with them. She looked at the baby, and at Helga, and shrugged. She was confused herself, and not used to the God's signs being wrong. Helga reassured her as best she could. Perhaps the Gods had a reason, because of what had come of her signs.

Then, the first troubles began. The other women had accepted Helga as Chief, even though Viking law said no woman could become Chief. They had sworn fealty to her as any warrior would swear to any man they would accept to lead them. They did not want a male heir. They said they should kill the child, or give him away to another tribe. They were angry.

Helga called them all together, with the babe in her arms, and talked

to them. She told them she could never bring the evil of Argh upon others. She warned them that others, with many of the small tribe pregnant, may also bear sons. She then swore that she would have another child, or adopt one, so that the brave women, those burglars of the Bog isle, would never have to follow the rules and enslavement of men again.

And then she took herself, and the Elder, and the fierce woman she chose as her General, and those who best organized the village, and she created her counsel, and they laid out the laws of their tribe— laws unheard of elsewhere.

Oh, there was fighting, and arguing, and throwing of furniture, and much swearing—but in the end, they had the Law of the Bog-Burglars, as they came to be.

All children would be raised, educated and trained, but only woman can hold positions of power. No man can be Chief, or heir to the tribe.

They realized that certain skills were in short supply. But a man could only live there by invitation, and could never become a member of the council, or head of a clan.

Woman could marry, or not, at their own will. Nobody would ever sign a girl away to marriage against her consent again. Ever. Marriage itself was an option. The council declared that bastardry would hold no shame in the tribe.

Others eventually discovered the tribe. There were a few battles, and the women fought as crazed, winning handily. None wanted to return to the rule of men.

A few years later, Helga gave birth to a daughter, whose father was a rather handsome sailor from a ship who stopped a week for repairs. The tribe rejoiced.

Once word spread, some other women began finding their way there. All were considered, but there were rules. You could stay only if you had some skill to offer the village. They would accept no criminals escaping their crimes, even if the entire village was, in the beginning, thieves and escaping wives. But very, very few were turned away.

Helga's first General fell in love with a shipwright, who was a good man, and he was the first man allowed there. He built them a proper fleet, fishing boats, longships, and the Bog-Burglar favorite, small, light longboats able to travel anywhere quickly.

And travel they did. They earned their name, training in the art of sneaking around. They visited other tribes, without them knowing, of course, and soon became the wealthiest, best outfitted tribe in the Archipelago. Others soon found it was best to deal with them than stand against them.

And the tribe grew and prospered.

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"Wow." Astrid muttered. "They didn't tell us all that."

"Those men were so embarrassed they tried to erase the whole history of us. But, we're still here."

"I could see why. But what happened to Urg?"

"Argh. His clan died out. No male heir, apparently. Even the clan name was forgotten. The Uglithugs are still there, of course, but the children evened out eventually, and they got a bit more level-headed."

"Is this a secret? Did they find out it was you?"

Camicazi smiled. "It was a generation or so later when the Uglithugs found this place. Enough of them remembered the tales, and started a fight. We put them in their place fast enough, and they never tried it again." Camicazi snickered. "It helped that we got even with that, sneaking onto their island and stealing every damned thing in their whole tribe but the underwear they had on."

She continued. "And that's why the men tell the tales they do. They don't want their women running to us, and they don't want to remember that it was the men, and their attitude towards us, that created us. And they especially don't want people to understand how a tribe run by women can work just fine."

Astrid looked wistful. "I can see how it can be attractive, now. Hel, Mom warned me I was about to be married off, and to the most disgusting boy in the tribe."

Camicazi got a calculating look. "And now?"

Astrid smiled. "Now, it's Hiccup. And I have no problem with that."

"That's the Bog-Burglar way, then. A woman can choose, or not choose, who she wants."

Astrid's face screwed up in a frown. "But I didn't want him, until I decided I did want him."

"When you looked at him. He's a man of secrets, isn't he?"

"Oh, so many more than you could ever guess."

Camicazi sighed. "I can't fault you, not if you really care for him, but I have to convince my Mother."

Another frown. "Why would she be worried? It's Hiccup, for Thor's sake! He doesn't want war."

Camicazi took a few deep breaths. "Look, I don't know what Stoick told anyone, but Mom has a reason for being paranoid." She looked over at Astrid. "Did you hear how Mom got to be Chief?"

Astrid shook her head. "Not exactly, no. Something special?"

Camicazi looked out towards the docks. "You could say that. Mom was young, and I was just a baby. Her Mother was at some big Thing, on

the Meathead island. It was the day all the Chiefs got together to go over the laws. Turns out some madman made a bunch of demands on them, and everybody laughed at the guy."

Camicazi met Astrid's gaze. "Not long after he left, the place was attacked, and blasted to the ground by dragons. And it wasn't like a usual raid, either. This was a bunch of dragons that attacked this one building, with all the Chiefs inside. Witnesses thought everyone was dead, but later, one slightly crispy Chief crawled out of the wreckage."

"It was Stoick.", she continued. "He was the only survivor. On that day, almost every heir in the Archipelago became Chief, Bertha included." She sighed. "Stoick helped everyone get settled in the best he could, and he got a lot of respect and loyalty from the others. And that grated on Mom a bit. Stoick's the closest thing the Archipelago has ever had to a, well, Chief of Chiefs. And Mom doesn't like that in the hands of any man."

Astrid gave a scowl. "But it's Hiccup. He wouldn't do--"

Camicazi cut her off; "I know it's Hiccup. It doesn't matter to her. If anybody controls dragons, she is going to want that power for us."

"He doesn't control them like that. None of us do. It's like, well, being friends. They're not sheep."

"And you say you used them to kill a giant dragon?"

"Well, we fought it. Hiccup did the hard part."

"So Hiccup is the dangerous one?"

"He's not dangerous!"

"Then how would you put it?"

Astrid's mouth opened and closed a few times. But no words came out.

"Yeah. So how can I talk to my Mother about it, then?"

Astrid sighed. "Can't we just let this settle down a little? There's a€| lot of stuff going on right now. But Hiccup isn't going to go out and conquer Midgard this week."

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****NOTES:****

I am sorry for the delay. I have a lot of polishing up to do. Also, blame other authors.

So, I'm not pushing any friends, here. These authors don't even know I exist. But I read a lot of new stuff, and follow a few recommendations, and tripped over a few really neat stories.

u/2716266/Determamfidd wrote a really nice story, 'Talking In Her Sleep', which is a great lead-in for 'When in Rome', a sprawling epic I loved.

u/387401/Midoriko-sama has published a truly marvelous (and I don't throw that word around lightly) story (or two) in the 'Becoming' Trilogy.

There went a couple of weeks of my spare time. And technically, after reading those, I might as well hang up my quill, figuratively speaking. After reading those, I had to edit my stories, so as not to be accused of stealing ideas. Great minds must think alike, then.

Really, after reading a few thousand stories here, it's hard to come up with something original. All the good stuff is taken.

I am amazed at the number of follows and favorites I have here. I just try my best. Thank you.

I also got discouraged watching the latest 'Race to the Edge' episodes. Look, we know at the end of the first movie, Astrid claims Hiccup. That's the only way you could interpret a big smooch in front of the whole village. Then we know that in the second movie, she's Stoick's 'future daughter-in-law'. Now in the early TV series, there were some 'Hiccstrid moments', such as 'Gift of the Night Fury', 'Frozen', or the Thawfest episode. A kiss here, a hug, a lot of concern.

Now, in any journey, to get from A to C, you go through B. Race to the Edge could be thought of as B here, since it's after the Red Death, and before Drago. So what's going on? Not only is Astrid just 'one of the guys' with practically no personal Hiccup time, there's now sort of a wedge, what with her dealings in secret with Heather. I can't see where this is going, and it irks me.

Also, a lot of time is going into my 'promotion' at work. Well, it's a promotion in that I'm doing more, and learning more, and responsible for more, but my paycheck remains the same. The one big thing is that I'm no longer on second shift, which is lighter work and responsibility, but raised to first shift, which means, among other things, better grooming, since first is when the suit-and-tie people hang around the plant.

On the one down side, second shift is where I had more time to read and write here.

End
file.